

THE LAND: FOUNDING

CHAOS SEEDS: BOOK I

A LITRPG SAGA



ALERON KONG

The Land: Founding

By

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The Land: Founding

A work of Tamori Publications

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I am who I am only because of the love and time that many people have dedicated to me, and so I dedicate this book to you. First and foremost, I dedicate this book to my mother, Stephanie Hisako Kong. You have taught me much, and more than anything else you have taught me to be strong. I love you.

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The Dark Court



The Prince sneered at the back of the throne room, while the sycophants and greedy court leeches pleaded their cases to the Dark Queen. Every day, every year, every millennia was exactly the same. Hearing their simpering complaints of needing more power, or their false pride in capturing a few more souls, the Prince tried to summon anger, disdain, or hatred. All he felt though, was boredom.

In any other reality, these would be gods, demon lords, or spirit kings. In this exiled pocket of space and time, however, they were pathetic. The members of the Dark Court fought each other for the meager scraps of power the Queen doled out. They were like cubs at her teat. Though the Prince also lived at her mercy, he consoled himself with the fact that he would not do so for much longer. Today, he began the plan. Today, he brought the first Earthling to The Land. Today, he was one step closer to escaping this eternal prison.

Long ago, every member of the Dark and Light Courts had been exiled to this small shard of reality. To ensure that none ever escaped, the

Universe had sealed the prison with a magical lock that would never rust and could not be picked. An entire world had been formed using small or large amounts of every magic in creation, a world simply called “The Land.” Since this world’s creation and despite having vast powers, not one member of either Court had been able to escape the pocket dimension.

Coming back from his musings, the Prince nodded to the Grand Vizier, who slowly nodded back. The Vizier appeared to have a hunched stature, but his true form was unknowable. He had never been seen out of his dark robes, and the garment completely covered his body. The Vizier was his closest ally and one of the few Exiles that was older than the Prince. He was not a friend, however. There were no friends in the Dark Court.

Nonetheless, the Vizier had convinced the Prince that the reason all previous attempts to escape had failed was that they had been too small in scope. Why try to escape the perfect prison? Instead, if they could destroy the lock, the pocket dimension that held them prisoner would open. They would all be free. Most importantly, the Prince would be free. The conclusion was simple, The Land had to be destroyed. The question, however, was how to do it? That was when the Vizier had told him about Earth.

The Earth was a world almost completely devoid of magic. They had no gods to tell them what they should and should not do. Only humans remained as the other races had been slain by them at the dawn of the world.

It had created a population that committed atrocities on par with the most heinous of the Dark Court's residents. What truly made the Earth unique, however, was that every human was born with a small seed of Chaos in their souls.

For millennia, the Prince had watched the savages of Earth. He saw their civilizations rise and fall. If there was one constant that held true, it was that when enough of the Earth humans were in one place, destruction inevitably followed. The Chaos inside of them made such a conclusion inevitable. The Earthlings had already come close to destroying their own planet several times. If enough humans could be brought to The Land, all of those seeds of Chaos just might destroy it. He would be free.

That just left the problem of how to get enough of them there to accomplish his plan. Though the Prince was powerful, he could not just force them to go. Unfortunately, each and every being in the Universe had free will. The Earthlings had to *choose* to go to the Land. It was true that the Prince had collected a few souls here and there. There were always mortals foolish enough to trade their immortal spark for material wealth or power. It was not enough though. He needed millions of Chaos Seeds in the Land, causing havoc and destruction. How could he convince so many? No answer presented itself. So he watched and waited.

Ultimately, the people of Earth found a magic of their own called

science. Their faith in science replaced older faiths which had warned of beings like the Prince. Their belief in science had even caused them to lose faith in the existence of the soul. He could not help but chuckle as paradoxically the amount of souls he captured from that world increased. Who wouldn't accept wealth and power in exchange for something they didn't even think existed?

As more and more of the humans predictably sought to escape their mundane and banal existence, they found that release in many ways. Substances to cloud their minds, war, suicide, and other amusements. The Prince came to enjoy watching the atrocities of the small blue planet. It took only a few centuries after their discovery of electrical power for them to develop games to distract from their pointless lives. Soon after came the creation of virtual realities. These digital worlds gave millions of humans the escape they craved with their whole hearts and, unknowingly, with their whole souls.

That was the key, the Vizier explained to him one day. Why try and convince these humans to trade their souls, when they were already begging for a new life? Why not give them what they were already asking for? It didn't take much work for the Prince to have one of his agents create a virtual world modeled after The Land. With his guidance, it quickly became the most popular and pervasive game on Earth. Millions played every day. They

became the orc shaman that was powerful in a way that the tax accountant playing him in “real life” never was, or the sexy elf maiden who finally found that attention she craved, but no longer received as an aging housewife.

And as for the pesky matter of free will, each and every player agreed to come to the Land willingly. They signed their digital names to the contract when they started playing the game. After all, the Prince thought with a small smile, who had time to read all that fine print?

PROLOGUE



EARTH, North America, 2037

“I swear to God, Silk. If you get caught on the way in just because you’re trying to steal some cheap loot, I’m going to nail your nuts to a stump and kick you backwards.”

“Calm down, Crush. Jesus! Where the hell do you get this stuff?” Silk put down the gold candlestick he had picked up, hearing the sound of chuckles over the group chat. “I’m on it.”

The rest of the party watched safely from behind a grove of trees several hundred yards away, nearly invisible in the dark. The only reason they could see what was happening in the castle, was that Jewel had cast the spell *Shared Vision*. Now a small magical window showed them everything that Silk could see.

“I will not calm down,” Crush protested. “You’re messing with the big payday.”

“He’s not wrong, Silk,” Loki said. “It took us forever to even find

this castle, then fight through the wilds, and finally break through the defenses to allow you a small window of time to get in. No one on the forums has even heard of the Castle of Transition. The loot we could get from this place will probably be artifact!”

“Okay, okay, fearless leader. I’m on it.” As Silk spoke, he looked down and gave his four party members a great view of him scratching his virtual balls.

“You’re a dick, Silk!” Daliah spat.

A low chuckle came over the group chat as Silk made his way down the stairs to the lower levels, “That’s not what you said the other n-”

The rest of the comment was lost to everyone as Daliah sent a psychic pulse through the spell connection. It was the mental equivalent of stubbing your toe in the middle of the night on the way to the bathroom, minor but insanely irritating.

“Enough, Silk!” Loki commanded. “And cut that crap out Daliah. I hate that.” The rest of the group was nodding and glaring at Daliah, who had the good grace to look down and away.

Silk, for his part, stopped the chatter and continued down the dark hallway he found himself in. There were no torches or other light sources in the castle. If not for his Senses of the Bat subskill, that Rogues only gained

upon reaching the lofty level of one hundred and thirty, then he would have been knocking into walls. Luckily, their entire party was ranked in the top one hundred groups in The Land, so none of them were noobs.

What was strange was the complete lack of monsters and NPCs (non-player characters) in the castle. The lands surrounding the castle were teeming with high-level creatures and difficult terrain. It had taken Jewel a solid day to burrow a hole in the shield covering the castle, burning through countless replenish mana potions. It meant that the castle shield had an ungodly amount of HPs (hit points). And the hole had barely lasted a few seconds before shutting again. Silk had managed to wriggle through, but no one else had been able to follow. It meant that if he got in trouble, he was totally hosed.

He had yet to encounter any resistance, though. The layout had no hidden traps he could detect, no mazelike corridors and no enemies. It was like it was inviting him in. Hopefully inviting me into the treasure room, Silk thought gleefully. He would love some artifact level gear, like those Gloves of Dark Beckoning that Chinese kid had posted he'd found in a secret labyrinth. Lucky a-hole!

As Silk made his way down a fifth spiral staircase, green light welled up from the lower level. The entire party caught their breath in anticipation. Months of work were hopefully about to pay off. The Rogue stepped into a

round room, and they saw the source of the light. It was coming from an arch of black crystal.

Within the arch was a rippling Dartmouth green energy field. Looking at it was almost like staring straight down into a deep and limitless ocean on a stormy day. In front of the arch was a short column with the indentation of a handprint on top. In the rest of the room there was... absolutely nothing.

“Are you effing kidding me? Where is the loot?” Crush shouted. The rest of the group kept quiet, but they all shared the same disappointment.

“Maybe it’s back up top,” Jewel said hopefully. “Probably down another corridor?”

“So what do I do here,” asked Silk, “do I put my hand on it? Do a little dance maybe?”

“You could make a little love,” Loki suggested.

“Maybe get down tonight,” Crush finished. Light chuckles came over the chat line.

“Uhhhh, I say touch it,” a voice said.

“Was that you, Daliah?” Silk asked, exasperated. “I don’t know why I keep expecting you to be smart just because you’re psychic. Loki, what should I do?”

“Uh... touch it,” Loki replied.

“That’s what she said,” Crush’s plugged quietly in his gravelly voice.

“Thanks, oh fearless leader,” Silk exclaimed, responding to Loki.

“You’re about as useful as a Swiss cheese condom... and good one, Crush.”

More chuckles came over the chat line.

He braced himself to touch the pedestal. He was really hoping there wasn’t any pain. Even though the game muted it down, even a minor burn or electrical shock could ruin your whole morning. Still though, they hadn’t come all this way for nothing. Silk placed his hand on the imprint.

“Are you the agent of your people?” a deep voice boomed, seeming to come from all directions at once. At the same time the only door leading out of the room clanged shut.

Immediately lowering his body and drawing both daggers, Silk quickly looked around. There was no place for anyone to hide. They could always be cloaked or veiled, but his True Sight Talent had maxed out more than forty levels ago, and no players or NPCs had been able to hide from him for quite a while. Assuming it must have been a game prompt, he tried to chat with his group, but no one responded to his queries. Shrugging, he answered.

“Uhhhh, yeah.”

The voice spoke again, “Do you embrace a life of adventure and

danger, love and betrayal, power and wonder?”

“Yes,” the word came out stronger, Silk’s greedy little heart imagining the top shelf loot they were about to get.

“Will you be among the first to move forward, preparing the way for others?”

“Hell yeah!” Silk shouted, throwing both fists in the air.

Silence greeted his proclamation. After a few seconds, he realized that unless you are an Asian time traveler who had saved a cheerleader, you just couldn’t pull this stance off. Before he could lower his arms though, he heard another voice. It was quite different from the previous deep bass, and it said in a self-satisfied tone, “Thrice heard and witnessed.”
The world flashed white and...

CHAPTER 1 – Day 1 – Sanren 21, 15,368 ABG



James covered his eyes against the sunlight that seemed determined to drive ice picks... naw, I'm better than that... fire picks? Yeah, much better, he thought sleepily. Yes, fire picks through his eyes just because he had slept in. It was Saturday, wasn't it? He struggled to remembering the night before. Reaching down, he tried to pull the covers over his head, except he couldn't find them. In fact, as his hand fell back to what he thought was his mattress, everything felt remarkably, well... grassy. Now that he was waking up, he realized that his pillow wasn't soft. It actually felt remarkably like a sharp rock jabbing into his back.

Showing bravery on par with assaulting a horde of giants, or talking to a really hot chick sitting at the bar, he opened his eyes and took in his surroundings. He was in a small glen studded with wildflowers and colorful plants. At his back was a large shelf of stone and beyond it were the foothills of mountains rising in the distance. There were also trees in front of him forming the other boundary of the glen, rising tall and majestic. The scent of pines mingled with the fragrance of the flowers. Birds of various types could

be heard performing call and refrain. The moss growing on the trees was a brilliant green, and there was a crystal clear pool several feet in diameter between him and the stone outcropping. It was one of the most serene and beautiful settings he had ever seen. It evoked feelings of connection and tranquility and he expressed himself accordingly.

“What the hell!”

He sat upright as quickly as he could, not at all helping the headache that blazed in intensity at his swift movement. Looking down, he imagined the pain might have something to do with the curved rock that had been under his head. The tender lump he found when his fingers searched his scalp confirmed his hypothesis. As James took in his surroundings, he was interrupted by a slightly off-key and resigned-sounding voice that spoke from behind him.

“About time you woke up.”

Turning his head, slower this time, he saw the small form of an imp lazily flapping its wings as it hovered three feet off the ground. It had gray dusky skin, and pitch black, bat-like wings perched on its back. Its body was humanoid, if only one foot tall. James stared at it in fascination. The only clothing it wore was a black loincloth that reached to its knees. He was absolutely fascinated! The VR module had never produced a creature so

lifelike and unique before. Standing up, he slowly walked closer, examining it in wide-eyed wonder until he was only an inch away. He took in every detail, completely enthralled. That feeling faded rather quickly after it kicked him in the eye.

“Ahhhh! You dirty little-” James immediately began swatting at it with his right hand while holding his eye with his left. It lazily floated out of the way of his swing and rolled its eyes while sighing heavily.

“Look,” it said. “I’m here to help you and even if I wasn’t, it would take a lot more than a friggin noob to take me out. Now if you don’t want me here, I can always leave.” It turned its back as it spoke. Its wings flapped faster and it began to gain altitude.

“No, wait!” James called out quickly, reaching out with one hand. “I just don’t know what’s going on. Last thing I remember, I was in this castle, and then there was a light, and now I’m here.” He realized his tone had turned a bit whiney so he added with a bit of forced indignation, “And who are you calling a noob?”

Ignoring his question, the imp faced him again. The flyer regarded him silently for a moment. It was almost like it was daring him to say something else to offend it. After a minute, and with a small nod to itself (himself?), it began to speak again.

“Okay noob, you are in The Land. You are NOT playing a game anymore. I’m going to say it slowly this time. You... Are... NOT... In... A... Game. Your mind and soul have been transported here and placed in this body. Let this sink in. If you look around, you can see that you are in a small glade. This is a safe haven, but as soon as you leave it, you can die. If you die, then you will come back to this point, unless you find another safe location or town to bind your spawn point to. The good news is that no one else should be able to find their way here. Even if they did, the enchantments on this glade should keep them out unless you lead them in.”

James opened his mouth, but stopped when the imp raised its hand.

“This will go a lot faster if you just listen. A being a lot stronger, and I’m guessing smarter than you has paid me a great deal more than you’re worth to tell you these things. Believe me, millions of those other noob Seeds will not be getting this treatment, so just listen. As I was saying, you were guided to this particular spot by a higher being. Before you ask, no, I don’t know who. I’m here to give you some basic info about this world so you don’t become troll dung in the first few minutes.”

That statement made James immediately look around for enemies, but after hearing a long suffering sigh from the imp, he looked back. Once the creature saw that it had his attention once again, it continued, “The Land is bigger than the world you came from. You are one of the first of your people

to be brought to The Land, and you were lucky enough to be brought to this little safe haven. Apparently where most of you will land is random. Some of you might be in towns or cities, some in forests or mountains, and some will probably be dead on arrival because they fell into oceans and drowned. Who cares, right? You have landed in the Forest of Nadria, on the River Peninsula. Do you remember anything about this location?”

“Yeah, it’s near the Kingdom of Yves. Supposed to be a section of The Land with a crazy amount of rivers crisscrossing through it. As far as I know, the patch to travel here hasn’t been released yet though.”

“Good, you’re not completely useless,” the imp said. “The Land is not exactly like the game that you remember. Your character won’t be either. Case in point,” the imp snapped his fingers and a hand-sized wasp flashed into existence. The imp casually looked at James and simply said, “Attack.”

The wasp immediately flew at James with its stinger extended as it curled its body. He quickly rolled to the side, hearing and feeling a buzzing pass just by his ear. He tried to activate the *Hide* action of his character Silk. The wasp, upon missing with its first pass, immediately turned around and flew at him again. There was no doubt that it still saw him. This time he didn’t have time to dodge and its stinger punctured his left bicep. Red hot agony coursed through his body as he swatted the wasp away. Its stinger withdrew and it flew back into the air.

The pain was worse than anything he had ever felt. What the hell was going on? The pain dampeners were not supposed to allow anything to hurt that much, let alone just the sting of a wasp on steroids. He picked up a rock with his right hand, activated his attack buff *True Aim*, and threw. The stone flew from his hand towards the wasp. It lazily dodged to the side, the rock missing and accomplishing nothing. That was not supposed to happen. At his high skill level, there should have been less than a 1% chance of a projectile missing when he activated *True Aim*.

With no apparent thought at all to the injustice of the situation, the wasp flew in and stung him again, this time in his right shoulder. Agony lanced through him a second time, and he noticed a small green skull and crossbones in the bottom right corner of his vision. No longer able to fight off the wasp, as neither arm was working, he fell back and noticed the red horizontal bar in the top left corner of his vision was half gone. When he fell to the ground, the wasp pulled its stinger out of his arm and flew towards his head. He screwed his eyes shut as he awaited a poisonous needle to the face.

But nothing happened. He peeked a glance, opening one eye. He saw the wasp flying lazily around the imp who looked at him dispassionately.

“Well, what have we learned?” the imp asked putting emphasis on the last word.

“WTF?” James shouted.

“Well I hope you’ve learned more than that,” the imp replied sarcastically.

“Why didn’t any of my skills or actions work? And why did that hurt so much? Why is it still hurting? And why did that hurt so much?!?” James’ voice grew louder and shriller with each question.

“I already told you, noob, you’re not your character. I told you twice. You are not a level one hundred and sixty-seven thief. Those classes don’t exist the way they did in the game. It requires a lot for you to qualify for a Profession, and you are nowhere near that powerful yet. Don’t worry about it. Right now you are just some guy with two wasp stings in his arms, drooling on the moss. You have been sent to The Land from your world. You are really here. Not... your... character. Check out your status page.”

“How?” James asked. He would deny it till his dying day, but there was a bit of a whine in his voice now.

“Will it,” the imp replied simply.

Shutting the throbbing in his arms out his mind for a moment, he focused on wanting to see his status page. Suddenly his vision was blocked by a translucent rectangle.

Name: ???

Age: 24

Level: 1, 0%
Health: 100 **Mana:** 100 **Stamina:** 100
Strength: 10
Agility: 10
Dexterity: 10
Constitution: 10
Endurance: 10
Intelligence: 10
Wisdom: 10
Charisma: 10
Luck: 10
Abilities:
 Limitless
 Gift of Tongues
Skills:
 None
Marks:
 None
Resistances:
 None
Race: Human (Chaos Seed)
Reputation: Level 1 “Who are you again?”
Alignment: Neutral
Languages: Common

Willing the window to go away, he focused back on the imp, who started talking again.

“So I guess you now know you’re the definition of a basic bitch?”

“Excuse me?” James was convinced that he had misheard. The wasp stings had been embarrassing, but this was just too much.

“I was chosen to speak to you because I have paid attention to your world. It means there is a slightly higher chance of an ape like you understanding when an enlightened being like myself deigns to speak with you. Now seeing as how my wasp has just made you its bitch and your stats are all basic, ipso facto, my earlier assertion of your status. Any more questions?”

James just stared at the imp with his mouth hanging slightly open, swollen arms hanging at his sides, blinking in disbelief.

“Annnyway, you’ll be able to examine your stats in greater detail later. Do you know the difference between abilities and skills?”

Shaking his head at the imp’s ridiculous attitude, James replied, “Abilities are things you are born with or are given to you, skills are what you can learn. But I don’t know what Marks are.”

“That makes sense, they weren’t included in the game you played. Marks will appear as small tattoos on your body. They can indicate allegiance or increases in abilities you have picked up. I’m told technically they can represent religious affiliation as well, but since there aren’t any gods in The Land, no one knows for sure. Right now I’m guessing you have nothing in any of these areas. Do you?”

James examined his two abilities more closely.

Limitless – you can proceed to any level in any skill with 100% affinity.

Gift of Tongues – you can speak and understand any language once exposed to it. You cannot speak to lower lifeforms or higher beings.

He related these to the imp whose face took on a look of surprise. The small being cast a spell, waving its hand in the air and rattling off an incantation. A blue glow surrounded its hand for a moment before winking back out of existence.

“So that’s why he’s invested in you,” the imp said under its breath. It looked at James and continued, “Gift of Tongues is pretty self-explanatory. You can understand humanoids and other sentient beings, but not animals or beings of higher power like myself. For example, *shi rine ka’ frine parul cha*. Did you understand any of that?”

“No,” he replied. “What did it mean?”

“Don’t worry about it,” the imp said with a smirk. “Your language ability will definitely be useful. It even seems to extend to understanding written languages, which similar abilities and spells normally don’t. What is truly interesting is your other ability. I’ll try to speak slowly and use small words so you can understand. Every creature born has a predisposition to being good at some things and bad at others. You might be a natural dancer, so you have an 80% chance to increase your level with practice. You might

be naturally clumsy and so only have a 10% chance of increasing as a pick pocket. In that case, you will almost assuredly have a low skill level no matter how much you practice. Apparently whatever *you* try to learn, you have the ability to increase with no cap. You could one day be very powerful,” it said thoughtfully. “I would keep the knowledge about this ability to myself if I were you. There are those who would neutralize you now for fear of what you will become.”

“But not you?” James asked.

“I was well paid to advise you. Trust me when I say that you’re lucky to have me. The Universe is a big place and I don’t think I have too much to fear from one human. Besides, for an eternal being like myself, if I can’t be trusted to do a job, I won’t get many more.”

“Fair enough,” James wheezed. He was still trying to breathe through the pain, but it was starting to make focusing on the conversation a bit difficult.

“Now, I’m sure by that pained expression on your face, you’ve realized that your health is not restoring. Lower health means more pain, and total loss of health will cause death, of course. Low mana makes it harder to think and low stamina makes you sluggish and weak. While magic and stamina will replenish over time, your health will not without prolonged rest

or healing magic. As a chaos seed, you will heal faster than others, wounds improving over hours rather than days, but still it will take time without help. As so,” the imp waved its hand and shadowy tendrils extended to touch James’ arms, finally providing relief to the burning aches.

James immediately started breathing easier, seeing the red bar of his health growing. “Thank you so much.” He almost cried in relief, “I’m obviously completely lost here and despite that first cheap shot, I appreciate your help. Would you please tell me your name so I can address you properly?”

The imp smiled genuinely for the first time, “You may call me Xuetrix. That is of course not my real name. You must never give your real name as with the right knowledge or abilities, it might allow great power over you. Now with that said, what should people call you?”

A translucent screen appeared in front of his gaze again. It simply said, “Name:” and had a blinking cursor after it.

James thought for a moment, happy with the advice. His character Silk had served him well, but if what Xuetrix said was true then his power could increase exponentially. If he really was in a new world, he planned on getting as strong as possible and making an impact. He would shake the ground and his accomplishments would only be measured by...

James smiled and looked at Xuetrix.

“My name is Richter.”

CHAPTER 2 — Day 1 – Sanren 21, 15,368 ABG



“What’s a chaos seed?” Richter, aka the human formerly known as James, asked, looking at his race.

“It is the type of human you are. I am actually not sure what that means exactly, so you will have to discover that by yourself. Everyone from your world is a chaos seed is what I was told, though. That also might be a piece of information that you will want to keep to yourself. It doesn’t exactly sound warm and cuddly, and the various peoples of The Land might take it the wrong way,” the imp advised. Richter accepted the advice silently.

“Very well, Richter. It’s time for us to part ways. The last advice I will give you is that though you should advance as quickly as possible, always remember that it’s not all about level. After all, a level 100 rabbit could never kill a level 1 wyvern. It is the application of power that rules the day, not simply having power. THINK! Learn what you can, and be careful how you treat those you encounter. You never know when the actions of today will impact the outcome of tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Xuetrix, I really owe you,” Richter said, extending his

hand.

“What?” Xuetrix said, looking confused.

“I said I owe you.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Richter said with some exasperation.

“Thrice heard and witnessed,” the imp said with a sly smile.

A notification popped into Richter’s view

*You have made a **Vow** to **Xuetrix**. Failure to do so when asked will cause a decrease in your reputation with all beings, and other unknown consequences. Keep in mind, your word means everything.*

By the time he cleared the message, he was greeted by the sight of the imp hovering with its wasp, a small smile on its face. Then the devilish creature just snapped its fingers, and they both vanished to the faint smell of sulfur.

“I’ve got to learn to keep my trap shut,” Richter said aloud with a deep sigh.

“Enjoy my gifts, Richter,” Xuetrix’s disembodied voice said. “I like powerful friends, especially when they owe me favors. Hahaha.” Four items dropped to the ground in front of him.

Picking up all four, he was awarded with new message notifications.

You have received: Simple Short Bow	Attack: +5-6 Durability: 15/15 Item Class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 3.1 kg.
You have received: Iron Arrows with Quiver	Quantity: 10 Durability: 2/2 Item Class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 1.1
You have received: Dull Bronze Knife	Defense: +1-3 Durability: 20/20 Item Class: Common Quality: Average Weight: 0.4 kg
You have received: Minor Ring of Healing	Durability: 8/8 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.01 kg

Richter looked at the items gratefully. None of them were *epic* class, but there were way better than nothing. The first three prompts were white, while the last was a pleasing green. Richter wasn't sure if that was because the Ring of Healing was magic or for some other reason. To him, it didn't really matter. After experiencing the pain from the wasp stings, having the ability to heal himself was a god send.

He slipped the ring on his finger and the quiver over his shoulder. The prompts remained in his vision, but as soon as he thought about wanting them gone they disappeared. With that done, he finally took in his surroundings and attire. He was wearing a sleeveless tunic and rough spun brown pants. On his feet were dark tan moccasins. He actually might be extremely stylish on Rodeo drive as he remembered hearing something about the “peasant” look making a comeback. Only thing missing was... Yup! Richter definitely needed to be the first person to invent boxer briefs in this world. He also needed to find some cotton. Whatever ‘rough spun’ was, it was definitely NOT the fabric of his life.

Looking around, he examined the small glade. The pool of crystal clear water abutting the rock face was surrounded by multicolored plants. A line of trees hid the small glade from view, creating a hidden enclave. Walking up to the pool he looked down at the plants, but could not identify any of them. Herbs always came in useful in games though, so he decided to grab them.

*You have picked up an unknown plant. Due to a lack of **Herb Lore** you have destroyed the plant. Maybe you can use what is left to apologize to your mom.*

Shaking his head, Richter thought, what is with these messages? Seeing nothing else that could be of use he turned to leave the glade, but

stopped as he was thirsty. Going over to the pool he paused as he saw his reflection in the still water. A man's face stared back at him. The expression was curious and kind. He had chestnut colored skin, and hazel eyes. His hair was cut short and was a mop of black curls close to his head. It looked like his old face, but leaner and more rugged. It was a visage he could live with.

He knelt down to scoop some water in his hands, but hesitated. Should he drink this? Everything here seemed to have some meaning. What if this was the Pool of Eternal Firerrhea? He was already thirsty though, and drinking from an unknown source would always be a risk.

Taking a deep breath, he sipped from the water in his hand.

*You have tasted the **Waters of Clarity**. You can see the way forward with greater ease than any others. Experience increased by 25% for the next twenty-four hours.*

Score! Let's get this going.

Happy with his lucky starting point (falling into an ocean or volcano would probably not have been super fun), Richter walked out of the glade and into his new life.

Leaving the glen, he felt a slight tingling. After walking through the trees for several yards, he looked back and saw what appeared to be only a stand of trees next to a cliff face. No one would be finding the glade without

help. For some reason, knowing that his starting point in the world was hidden away brought him a sense of security. He realized then that finding it himself might be a problem later. Losing something as clutch as that Pool of Clarity would be a bonehead move of epic proportions. He spent about half an hour rolling medium to small rocks to the base of nearby trees. They would look innocuous enough individually, but taking a larger view they formed a rough line toward the glen.

The forest seemed old. Trees grew massive, hundreds of feet into the air. There was a fair amount of space between the large trunks, but the floor of the forest was littered with detritus from fallen branches and thick undergrowth. The air was filled with the song of birds that filled the branches above his head. Sunlight filtered through the leaves, but the canopy was thick enough that its position could not be clearly pinpointed. Walking forward, he began to hunt, already being a bit hungry. After only a short time, he heard a faint snuffling up ahead of him.

Moving forward slowly he looked over a dip in the forest floor. A red fox was rooting through the leaves, hunting for some morsel or other tasty tidbit. He slowly nocked an arrow, making sure to avoid any extra noise. He paused a moment with the string taut as he exhaled, then released. The arrow flew through the air and hit the fox in its side. It let loose a high-pitched squeal and attempted to run. Richter quickly nocked another arrow and let

fly. It fell a foot short.

He ran to cut the fox off before it could leave the gully it had been searching in. Luckily, the fox seemed to have trouble running with the arrow in its side. Before it could escape, he was able to jump on it and drive his knife into its side.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Archery**. Slay your foes from afar. ‘Don’t look at my bow unless you want an arrow in your eye! +2% **bonus to aim**. +2% **bonus to damage**.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Small Blades**. ‘My blade might only be four inches long, but I promise, you’ll feel me. +2% **attack speed**. +2% **bonus to damage**.*

Red Fox (Lvl 1) has died. You have received 10 (base 8) experience points.

The prompts were translucent and filled a small amount of his visual field. They disappeared at a thought and he looked down at the fox. Killing it was more real than anything had been in the game. The blood was warm and sticky on his hand as it dripped slowly down the knife. It had kicked and moaned right before it died. The death of this small creature made his situation real in a way that nothing else had. Looking down at his vanquished foe, at the blood on the ground, at the life that was forever extinguished, something welled up inside of him. He fought the impulse, but he was

helpless against it and shouted, “What does the fox say? Ba ring ring ring ba ring ba ring ring!”

Chuckling to himself, he retrieved his arrow, and then picked up the fox by the tail. He kept moving forward. Over the next few hours of walking through the forest he killed many more forest creatures. Foxes, rabbits, chipmunks and even a small badger fell beneath his blade and bow. He collected them until...

TRING!

*You have reached **Level 2!** Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice. Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!*

Not bad, not bad. Seeing as his most valuable skill so far was Archery, he added his 25% there and was rewarded with another screen.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in **Archery**. +4% bonus to aim. +4% bonus to damage.*

Not a bad day's work, Richter, my boy.

With that thought, he collected all of the game he had hunted, and then headed back to his glade for a rest.

CHAPTER 3 – Day 2 – Sanren 22, 15,368 ABG



Upon waking, Richter quickly obtained his 25% XP buff from the Pool and left the glade. He decided not to place the points of his new level in any one area until he knew more about the world around him. He also decided that he would follow a small river that he had crossed yesterday. With his stomach rumbling, he wished he could have cooked the animals that he had killed. Since he lacked the ability to make a fire though, he had simply tossed the carcasses a small distance from the glen for the local wildlife to consume. His hunger had not gotten to the point of eating raw meat. Getting the trots from some weird, alien bacterial infection was most definitely not on his to-do list. After collecting and cleaning them, he left the pelts to dry on a rock outside of the glade, in full view of the sun.

Making his way to the river, he quickly started walking upriver. It wasn't overly large at this point, only about a dozen yards across. After about half an hour of walking, he found a bush with large bluish berries. Hunger outweighing caution, he took a handful, and placed them in his mouth. Upon swallowing he received the notification.

*You have eaten **Blue Forest Berries**. Concentration increased by 5% for the next four hours.*

He quickly placed another handful in his mouth, hoping for a cumulative bonus. Nothing. Well, he thought, that would have been the cheat to end all cheats. Watch out dragons, I have a magic bush. Chuckling at his awesome joke, he kept moving. He didn't really notice any kind of difference, but what would an increase in concentration feel like anyway? Richter was sure that a couple of his ex-girlfriends might be able to tell him, but they were all in another world now, so who cared? With the edge taken off of his hunger, he continued walking forward.

Keeping an eye out for small game, he killed three more foxes until he heard the voices. At first he had mistaken them for bird song, but the more he listened, the more he could make out faint words being spoken ahead of him.

"Get ready."

"I've been ready. I'm always ready."

"Quiet now, he's almost here. We need to stun him so he can be questioned."

"I know what we need to do."

"Quit arguing," a third voice said sternly.

Not quite believing that he was hearing an argument about what he was pretty sure was an impending attack on him, Richter stopped walking.

“Why did he stop walking?”

“How should I know?”

“I didn’t think you would know. I was just wondering out loud.”

“As opposed to wondering in quiet? That would be better.”

“Shut up! Should we just attack him?”

“Yeah, let’s attack.”

Still feeling that he was being punked in some way until that last musical statement, he quickly shouted, “Wait!”

Suddenly all was quiet.

Slowly backing up, Richter cast his gaze around, looking for the speakers. He didn’t see anything though. Either way, downriver was suddenly looking like a much better option. He was backing up until he heard a musical voice behind him.

“How do you know what we are saying? Humans never know what we are saying. Even most elves don’t know sprite speak.”

Quickly turning around, he saw nothing except the scrub hugging the banks of the river.

“I asked, how do you know what I am saying?”

The voice came from the bush directly in front of him. As he focused, it seemed that the air blurred in front of him, and the leaves became green clothing for a small man. He stood three and a half feet tall. He had an almost childlike smoothness to his olive skin. The features were Asian in appearance, and the eyes had no whites. They reminded Richter of an owl’s eyes, all bright color and pupil. What really captivated his attention however, was the fully drawn bow pointing at his face.

“He can’t understand us. Let’s just kill him and be done with it,” Richter heard from behind him.

“No! I can understand you. I’m sorry if I trespassed into your territory. I’m new to this world, and I’m just trying to survive.” Richter finally heard himself after the long statement. He was speaking in the same melodic language as the small man in front of him.

The arrow still pointed at Richter’s face, the creature in front of him said, “We have never found a human that understood us before.” Silence reigned for a short while. “We will take him to the Hearth Mother.” Staring Richter in the eye, the small man lowered his voice menacingly, at least Richter thought it was supposed to be menacing; hard to tell since it all sounded like bird song. “Don’t think we can’t hurt you. We may be smaller

than you, but believe me when I tell you that we know how to defend ourselves. Show him.”

And with that statement, a small blue blur flew by the right of Richter’s head and struck a fallen log in the river with a large bang. Wood chips and splinters flew in all directions, and Richter quickly covered his eyes and turned away.

“That was only one arrow,” the small man warned menacingly, “and you will never see the next one coming.”

“I understand,” Richter said to the Napoleonic figure in front of him. “You’re in charge.”

“Don’t forget it, human. Now turn around and keep walking.”

Richter continued moving forward along the bank. The two unseen sprites kept up their conversation, a near constant bickering taking place in front of him. Looking back, he could just make out the form of the small creature behind him, bow no longer drawn but arrow still nocked.

After several hours of walking, there was a break in the forest canopy. Richter could see that the sun was more than halfway across the sky. The trees suddenly parted to reveal a large meadow with golden, waist-high grass. A humongous hardwood was situated in the middle of the shining sea. Richter hadn’t even thought it was possible for a tree to grow so large. It was

easily the size of a forty story apartment building, massively dwarfing all other trees in the forest. The river continued along several hundred yards to the right of the golden meadow. The river Richter had initially been following had apparently been only a side channel. It had joined another, larger branch, which they had continued to follow upstream. Though the river was not far away, enough trees had been in the way that he hadn't been able to see the meadow or the huge tree in the middle until he was almost on top of them.

“Stop, human,” the creature behind him ordered. Speaking in a more normal voice he said to the others, “Go ahead and tell the elders what we found. We need to see the Hearth Mother. No stopping for grog or gossip.”

Still grumbling, the voices grew fainter as the others went off. Richter still couldn't catch sight of them, but he thought he detected two small parts in the sea of grass ahead of him moving towards the giant tree.

Richter did not have to wait long for a response.

The limbs of the tree rustled as if in a strong wind, although the grass in front of him did not move. Suddenly, a four-foot-tall woman appeared. Wild red hair was bound up in a nest above her burnished olive skin. A stern mouth sat beneath bright green eyes studying him with obvious intelligence.

“Well met, traveler,” she said in a smooth melodic voice. “You stand

before the Hearth Tree of the Wood Sprites of Nadria. I am the Hearth Mother, protector of our people and keeper of our secrets. I am known as Hisako. What may we call you?”

“Richter. I am pleased to meet you,” he said respectfully.

She looked at him, nodding slightly to accept the respect paid. “Never before have one of the tall folk seen our home and lived, and yet, you speak our language and do not... feel like other humans. Why is this?”

“I am not from here. My home is called Earth. Specifically, ATL, Georgia shawty! No...?” Richter heard crickets. “Okay then,” he gave a nervous laugh. Nothing like having a four-foot-tall Celtic druid appear in front of you to knock you off your game. It also doesn’t help when she insinuates that you won’t make it out of here alive. If the pain that horrid wasp had caused him was any indication, then he wanted no part of those mini missiles the sprites seemed to be able to fire.

“Hmmm, Richter of Georgia.” She said, tasting his name. “Very well. I sense no evil in you, though I also sense little good. You seem to be a blank slate somehow,” she said speculatively as she continued to gaze at him. “I will give you the opportunity to prove yourself. The forest wolves have been encroaching on our territory of late. They all seem sickened somehow. If you cull their numbers, we will allow you to keep your life. We might even find

more use for you than simply watering the roots of the Hearth Tree.”

*You have been offered a Quest: **Cleanse the Forest I.** Diseased animals have been threatening the wellbeing of the wood sprites. Kill five wolves to show that you can be relied upon. Reward: Safe passage through the lands of the Wood Sprites of the Forest of Nadria. Yes or No?*

Somehow he was sure that “watering the roots” didn’t mean setting up a crude irrigation system.

“I accept,” he said.

“We will observe you on your task. Do not attempt to leave the forest,” she warned.

“I do have one issue though,” Richter said hesitantly. “I only have three arrows left and little other gear to speak of.” The other arrows had been lost or broken during his day of hunting.

She gave a short, melodic laugh, “Always true of a human, looking to take as much as you can. So be it. Accept this gift of the wood sprites.” She then closed her eyes and began to chant softly as a green glow surrounded her. Only a few seconds later, she held in her hands human-sized arrows of dark wood with green tendrils tracing down the shaft.

You have received:
Sprite Arrows of Nature

Quantity: 20
Durability: 4/4
Item Class: Uncommon.

Quality: Well Crafted

Weight: 0.1 kg.

Traits: Accuracy +1. Damage +1.

Now that's an upgrade, he thought with a smile. "Let's go hunt some wolves."

CHAPTER 4 – Day 2 – Sanren 22, 15,368 ABG



Richter was led around the tall, golden grass surrounding the Hearth Tree. It was made perfectly clear that he was not allowed any closer to the sprites' home. Before she had left, Hisako had told him that the wolves have been attacking other animals with abandon. They were even not eating much of the animals except for perhaps a few bites. It meant the wolves were killing for sport. They had also been ranging downriver, closer to the Hearth Tree than they normally did. Although none of the sprites had been killed yet, apparently there had been some close calls. Looking to his right, he spied the taciturn wood sprite that had led him to the Hearth Tree. He found out his name was Sion. Even though the surly sprite no longer aimed an arrow at him, Richter could feel the animosity radiating in the small man's gaze. The Hearth Mother had sent Sion to accompany him on his quest. Sion had not been pleased with the order.

After walking for half an hour, he attempted to engage the sprite in conversation.

"So what can you tell me about the forest?"

“That it’s much more likely we will be eaten if you make a bunch of irritating noise asking idle questions,” Sion answered. His gaze never even wandered in Richter’s direction as he continued to scan the trees.

Having had just about enough of this green clad munchkin, Richter replied, “I didn’t mean to invade your territory. I was just hunting in the woods. If you don’t want to be here, why don’t you just go back and tell Hisako that you don’t want to accompany me?”

“We do not bicker and argue like humans. We do not question the wisdom of our leaders. By knowing our place, we serve the spirit of the forest. For instance, I would not bring dishonor upon myself by saying that it is absolutely ridiculous that we need a smelly stomper like yourself to help us, especially when I can’t reliably determine the difference between when you have spoken and when you have broken wind.” Sion paused for a moment, “I would never utter such words.”

This speech, which comprised probably 75% of all the words Sion had spoken since meeting him, was delivered in the same disinterested tone as those Geek Squad douches who recommended a customer plug the laptop in to fix the fact that it wouldn’t turn on anymore. (Speaking as former Genius Bar employee... those guys are the worst. Who needs to wear a damn uniform to install Windows anyway?)

Richter simply ground his teeth as he stomped forward before saying under his breath, “No one told me those blueberries made you toot.”

Continuing to move forward, it was about another hour before Sion raised his hand silently. Making eye contact, he motioned to a tree up in front of them to the left. Nocking an arrow, Richter slowly stepped forward, walking through the trees as silently as he could. As he passed a lichen-covered boulder, he saw the wolf. Its head was down as it greedily tore into what looked to be a rabbit. It was a mangy thing, brown and dusky gray in patches. On its side was an area bare of hair, giving the appearance of having been gnawed away. It would reach almost to waist height if it was standing straight up. He could see its ribs silhouetted against its skin.

Slowing his breathing, Richter smoothly drew back his bow and released the arrow with his exhale. The sprite arrow struck the wolf on its haunch. The animal immediately dropped the rabbit with a yelp and turned its eyes towards him, teeth bared. Richter saw its bloodshot eyes and foaming mouth and knew he had discovered the reason for the wolves leaving their normal hunting grounds. They were rabid. All such deductive thoughts fled his mind however, as it launched itself at him, seeming to cover the twenty yards in a blink. Reacting instinctively, he dove to the left, barely missing the wolf’s lunge. He fell sprawling, arrows falling out of his quiver and over his shoulder. Knowing he had bare moments before feeling the wolf’s teeth sink

into him, he drew his dagger and rolled over. He had barely turned when the wolf was upon him, lunging for his throat. Shoving his forearm against the wolf's neck, he attempted to stab it with the knife in his other hand, but the blade stopped on the wolf's ribs, barely penetrating. The wolf strained again, its fangs now mere inches from his face. Flecks of the wolf's slobber fell upon his face, mixed with gobbets of bloody flesh from the animal it had been eating. It strained against his forearm to get close enough to sink its teeth into Richter's throat and end his life.

Screaming in horror and anger, Richter adjusted the angle of the knife in his hands and stabbed it into the wolf on top of him. The blade now easily slid between the ribs of the wolf as he stabbed it again and again. Hot blood spilled over first his blade, then his hand and then his arm, but he still didn't stop exsanguinating his enemy, and the wolf's struggle didn't slow. Changing his angle of attack, he stabbed farther up towards the wolf's head. Richter felt the knife pierce the wolf's heart with the barest resistance followed by a small pop. The wolf seemed unaware of its own death for the briefest of moments before it collapsed on top of Richter.

"Ahhh, Arghh," Richter grunted, attempting to push the wolf's body off of himself. Instead, he settled for rolling it to the side. Then he just let his head fall back to the forest floor. He took several deep frantic breaths as he willed his heart to stop beating so wildly.

Rabid Forest Wolf (Lvl 4) has died. You receive 40 (base 32) experience points.

Laying on his back, he stared up at the green canopy above him. Small splotches of blue could be seen through the leaves. He was elated. “Woooo,” he shouted, punching his fist into the air. Turning his head to the right, he saw Sion looking at him quizzically.

“What are you doing?” the sprite asked.

“I’m celebrating. Where were you during the fight?”

“This is your quest, not mine. And it is clear that you are celebrating. I meant, why are you celebrating when those other wolves are right over there?” Sion asked, pointing to Richter’s left.

Slowing turning his head to the left, he saw two rabid wolves with their teeth bared, not fifteen feet away. Before he could move, the wolves were on him and his world narrowed to consist only of fangs, blood, and, above all, pain.

All color faded from his vision as his remaining eye stared up at a wolf’s mouth closing around his face, and then all was black.

You have died.

A blur of colors and the sensation of great speed, complicated by a lack of all emotion, until he felt as if he was falling from a great height with a

heart clenching stop...

A horrid scream ripped itself from Richter's throat, "Noooo, please stop, pleassseee!" His arms flailing around, his head whipped back and forth, wildly searching for the wolves. After a few frantic seconds, he realized he was back in the hidden glen. His conscious mind began to reconcile the subconscious knowledge he already possessed. He had died. The wolves had killed him. Closing his eyes, he curled up onto his side and cried. There was nothing graceful or dignified about it. His body was immobilized by great, racking sobs.

They had been tearing at him. They had torn off a piece of his chest before he died. He had... he had seen... that damn wolf had been chewing on a piece of him. The horror of it washed over Richter. He relived the cold feeling he had experienced at the moment of his death. He drowned in the memory of helplessness as the wolves' teeth had torn and ripped at his tender flesh. The horrors hammered at his psyche. His mental torture physically manifested in his inability to leave the fetal position. As soon as he came to the end of his nightmarish remembrance, the sequence started again from the beginning. He relived the experience over and over, not able to break free of the hellish loop.

As his mind continued to torture him, however, another emotion rose. As he thought about the experience and the pain, he began to feel something

else besides horror. It started as the kernel of a feeling, barely noticeable, inconsequential even. But it grew. After a while he recognized the emotion. He felt anger. No, that wasn't the right word. He felt... RAGE!

He raged at the wolves for hurting him. He raged at Sion for not helping him. More though, he raged at himself for being helpless and afraid. Not just in the past moments, or the past day, but instead at feeling just a bit afraid his entire life. Of not having any true control over his life's direction and instead bowing time and again to the demands of society, the demands of his family, or the ridiculous demands he made of himself fueled by reality TV and pop culture. He felt the need to take control of his own life. To face any issue head on and no longer escape. He felt, the need, for POWER!

Richter broke the loop of pain he had been reliving and stood, a fierce determination in his eyes. This was not about denying that something horrible had happened. That would have been just another form of escape. This was about accepting the realities of his life and, despite the numerous blows of fate, standing tall.

*You have uncovered your first **Quality!** You are **Resolute!** The choices in your life led you to a critical point. A nexus of opportunities were laid before you, many leading to disaster. You have chosen a finer path. The experiences of your entire life have culminated in this one moment. You have decided not to kneel, but to stand; not to beg, but to take; not to wait, but to forge ahead.*

Be true to yourself to find your specific power.

5% Bonus to Mental Resistance. 5% Bonus to Spiritual Resistance.

Staring at the message across his field of view, he blinked in surprise. He had not expected the Universe to reward him for his own personal journey, but he would take it. After a fashion, it made sense. While he could increase his speed, strength, and skills, he would ultimately be the same person, unless he decided to change within. With a firm twist to his lips, Richter smiled. It was time to get back to work.

The phantom pains of the wolf attack still plagued him somewhat, but they had lost much of their power. They were only illusions. They would not deter him. What was real was the air in his lungs, the power in his limbs and the strength of his will. Backlit by the sun shining down into the glade, Richter took a step forward to go and finish what he had started. It was in that moment of true purpose that he looked down and realized he was completely naked.

“Universe, you’re a dick.”

CHAPTER 5 – Day 3 – Sanren 23, 15,368 ABG



Making peace with the fact that it was most likely not going to be fun running through a forest with no clothes, he decided to check his status.

Name: Richter

Age: 24

Level: 2, 0%

Health: 100

Mana: 100

Stamina: 100

Strength: 10

Agility: 10

Dexterity: 10

Constitution: 10

Endurance: 10

Intelligence: 10

Wisdom: 10

Charisma: 10

Luck: 10

Abilities:

Limitless

Gift of Tongues

Skills:

Archery Lvl 2; 0% to next level, 100% affinity

Small Blades Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity

Light Armor Lvl 1, 0% to next level, 100% affinity

Marks:

None

Resistances:

Mental 5%

Spiritual 5%

Race: Human (Chaos Seed)

Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”

Alignment: Neutral

Languages: Common, Sprite

He had expected the loss in experience, but the loss in skill progression was a bit of a shock. Still, at his low level, it was not much of a setback. Skills were always harder to level up at high levels, though, and a loss in the future might truly hurt. If he remembered correctly, neither skill had been close to leveling when he died. Maybe if his progression in either skill had been greater, he wouldn't have gone all the way back to zero.

Richter knew that was possibly a vain hope, but it still comforted him. Either way, it was clear now that dying had real consequences.

One nice surprise was that he had gained a new skill. Richter really hoped he didn't have to get torn apart to gain his fourth skill, but at least something good had come out of the wolf attack.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Light Armor**. You are and your armor will be the perfect blend of speed and defense. Others can stand in heavy towers of metal. They make quite a clatter when your swift knife meets their eye. +2% to defense of all light armor.*

The real question facing him now was where to place his unused

points. He had no idea what he was going to need in this wide world. The lack of professions was a complete game changer. To be specific, Xuetrix had said that professions were just very different and hard to obtain. That information was next to useless at this point, offering no guidance at all. Dismissing it from his mind, Richter focused on what he did know. He decided that he needed greater speed to run and dodge if he was going to hunt the wolves. He placed all six unused points in Agility. Finally, he decided to limit some of his prompts. The combat and individual experience notifications were a distraction he could live without.

Silently vowing to make up for his lost progression, he sipped from the Pool of Clarity, and then took off at a fast jog from the glen. As he made his way to the river, the small plants and stones hurt his feet, but not as much as he would have thought. Heartened, he increased his pace to a run, making his way upriver. He quickly learned what Athenian runners must have known thousands of years before: a man running with no clothes was not exactly secure in a key area. He took back all of the times he wished sports bras had not been invented. Those poor girls must really hurt after a while. He amended his thought to, 'Well, let's be honest, almost all the times.' The sight of Sophia doing hurdles was a treasured memory. Sigh.

Focusing on the task at hand, he continued running forward, his new body seemingly up to the task of moving at high speed for several miles

before running out of steam. He pushed himself until his breath grew ragged, and sweat flowed in rivulets down his body. Then he pushed more. He ran until his stamina bar came perilously close to zero, and fainting seemed a real possibility. He would slow to a fast walk while it slowly built back up, but at 50%, would take off again. He had run many miles, and was nearing the end of his stamina for at least the tenth time, when he heard melodic voices above him.

“Quick! Shoot before he gets any closer.”

Throwing his hands up, he said, “Stop! I’m Richter, and have been seen by the Hearth Mother. I am approaching the Hearth Tree to fulfill the quest she posed to me. I will kill the wolves.” After he finished speaking, he realized that without trying, his mouth had been forming the musical language of the sprites.

There was a moment of silence until he heard a quiet whisper, “Proceed.”

Though he couldn’t see them as he walked forward, he knew he was being shadowed by the sprites. Word of his approach would likely make its way ahead of him, but he still slowed to a jog so as not to alarm the wary sprites. Checking his status, he saw that his Agility had increased by +1 due to his hours of running. After proceeding for a while through the forest, he

was finally rewarded with the sight of the Hearth Tree. As he approached the tall, golden grass, the forms of Hisako, Sion and four other bowmen greeted him.

Hisako looked upon him with a wary expression upon her face, while Sion stared at him with open surprise and distaste.

“What are you and why have you returned?” she asked. “I know that the man who accompanied my son fell. Are you the same being?”

Walking forward, Richter did not answer, but instead moved until he stood directly in front of Sion. With the flat of his hand, Richter slapped him across the face. The sprite fell to the ground, and Richter fell on top of him preparing to strike him again. He heard the creaking of drawn bows, and then the sharp command of the Hearth Mother, “CEASE THIS NOW!”

Richter felt his body seize into immobility while Sion cursed beneath him, staring into his face with a fury that matched his own. Sion stood and drew a long, needle-like rapier from his sword belt. The sprite drew his arm back to drive it into Richter’s eye, until Hisako spoke again, “I said cease! Now what is the meaning of this? What exactly do you remember?”

Richter, finding he could move and speak again, collapsed to the ground as she ended his paralysis. Quickly standing, he pointed at Sion and spat out the words, “I remember everything. He let me be torn apart and eaten

by the wolves while he just watched.”

Looking sharply at Sion, Hisako asked, “Is this true?”

“The quest was his not mine,” he grumbled, not making eye contact with the Hearth Mother.

“Yet you knew that you were sent to help him, and thereby help our people to remove a dangerous threat. We will address this in a moment. My first question remains, Richter. Are you whole of mind? Do you feel any gaps in your memory?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I am alive and I know who I am,” he replied. He had thought of what to tell the Hearth Mother during his run, but had not come to any clear conclusion. Upon seeing her, he decided to speak from strength. “I will always come back to finish my tasks AND repay my debts,” he added, looking over at Sion who glared back. “Now why do you keep asking about my memory?”

Returning his gaze to Hisako, Richter saw her face had resolved into decision. “The Wood Sprites of Nadria honor their commitments. We entered into a pact with you when you agreed to the quest and my people have not aided you as they should have.” With a snap in her sweet voice she said, “Sion! Bring Richter his items. Now!” The male sprite was smart enough not to argue with the Hearth Mother after hearing the steel in her voice. He

melled silently back into the grass, and was moving quickly if the disturbance in the grass Richter noticed was any indication.

“Your clothes were savaged and bloodied. Do not be concerned about that. We will give you greater protection than those rags ever provided in recompense for Sion’s behavior. I apologize for his part in the pain that you have suffered, and yet still I ask that you do not judge him too harshly. He has no love for humans, it is true, but his heart is stalwart, and he will stay true to a friend through death. In the meantime, please accept these gifts.” As she finished speaking, she closed her eyes and folded her hands as if in prayer. A green glow once again surrounded her, but much more intense than when she summoned the arrows. It grew in strength until it flared brilliantly. When his vision cleared from the sunspots, he found items in front of him.

You have received: Chest Plate of the Wood Sprite	Defense: +12 Type: Light armor Durability: 40/40 Item Class: Uncommon. Quality: Well Crafted. Weight: 4.1 kg. Traits: Increased Concealment in Woods +5.
You have received: Reinforced Pants of the Wood Sprite	Defense: +8 Type: Light armor Durability: 30/30 Item Class: Uncommon. Quality: Well Crafted. Weight: 2.2 kg. Traits: Increased Concealment in

	Woods +4.
You have received: Shoes of the Wood Sprite	Defense: +7 Type: Light armor Durability: 25/25 Item Class: Uncommon. Quality: Well Crafted. Weight: 1.3 kg. Traits: Increased Silence while moving +10
You have received: Bracers of the Wood Sprite	Defense: +7 Type: Light armor Durability: 30/30 Item Class: Uncommon. Quality: Well Crafted. Weight: 2.0 kg. Traits: Dexterity +3

Blinking in surprise, he stared at the Hearth Mother. Losing the edge in her voice, she simply smiled in understanding, “Please accept these gifts in the open spirit of reconciliation with which they are being given. I must warn you of the danger to your mind I referenced earlier, however. I am familiar with the immortal rebirth of higher level beings, though I have not heard of humans with this ability outside of the mightiest mages. While your rebirth will preserve you for the most part, it is still not without danger. You will most likely be reborn in all but the most extreme conditions, but each time you die there is a chance you may lose your memories in addition to experience and skills. There is no specific rule as to when this happens. It is a

serious reality which immortals must face. I have heard that the greater the purpose you have in the life you live, the greater the chance you will come back to yourself, but I do not know for certain. If you are frivolous with your safety, you may face an eternity where you do not remember those who love you or even your own name. A living hell of forgotten deeds, a cage of half-remembered relationships which will keep you trapped in an unending solitude. Live well, and may these gifts protect you and heal the damage between yourself and my people.”

Hearing her words, Richter was indeed moved by her generosity, and felt much of his anger drain away. The discovery that he could lose his sense of self upon death, however, was truly frightening.

As he started to equip his new armor, Sion came back with his old equipment in a brown sack, minus his clothing which Richter assumed was now only bloody strips and wolf scat. He dropped the items on the ground in front of Richter.

Looking at Richter, Hisako asked, “Will you finish the quest which you started? We will allow you to travel the forest either way, but this problem could well make the entire region unsafe before long.”

*You have been offered the opportunity to cancel the Quest: **Cleanse the Forest I.** The Hearth Mother believes Sion has not acted honorably. As such,*

you will be allowed to hunt and travel on the lands of the Wood Sprites without aggression from them whether you finish your quest or not. Do you wish to cancel? Yes or No?

“I finish what I start,” Richter replied. “I will kill the wolves, but you need to know that I don’t think it will solve the problem. The wolves I fought were driven mad with disease. They were rabid. If we don’t stop the source of infection, these woods will be rampant with rabid wolves, bears and other predators.”

“Do you accept the responsibility to root out this evil at its source?” she asked.

*You have unlocked the Quest: **Cleanse the Forest II**. It is clear now that some sickness has befallen the animals of the Forest of Nadria. Killing a few rabid animals will not correct this problem. You have been tasked by Hisako to figure out what is making the animals rabid. Reward: Increased regard from the Wood Sprites. Possible gifts from the Wood Sprites. Do you accept, Yes or No?*

Richter had assumed that his quest was a chain when he saw the Roman numeral “I” after the initial quest. He wouldn’t stop now.

“I will,” Richter replied steadily.

Looking back to the newly returned sprite, Hisako’s eyes hardened

again somewhat. “I cannot force acceptance into your heart, Sion. I know well why you might welcome the death of any human. This man is only responsible for the actions and drives of his own heart, however, not the evils of his entire race. I will not force you to accompany him again, but I encourage you to work towards clearing this dark mark from your life. Watching another in pain without offering aid is not our way. What will you do?”

A complex series of emotions worked its way across Sion’s face, but not much time elapsed before he answered, “I serve the Spirit of the Forest,” and he moved to stand beside Richter.

***Sion the Wood Sprite** has become your **Companion**. Companions will stay with you only as long as your goals align.*

Looking over the both of them, the Hearth Mother sent them off with, “May the Forest shade you.”

CHAPTER 6 – Day 3 – Sanren 23, 15,368 ABG



The two of them walked through the forest, both wrapped in silence as they dealt with their own personal demons. As they moved forward to the last place the wolves had been seen, intending to pick up their trail, Richter noticed a small icon along the left side of his vision with Sion's face. Focusing on it, a translucent window popped up.

Name: Sion

Age: 34

Level: 7, 47% to next level

Health: 160 **Mana:** 194 **Stamina:** 120

Strength: 17

Agility: 18

Dexterity: 44

Constitution: 16

Endurance: 12

Intelligence: 15

Wisdom: 13

Charisma: 9

Luck: 12

Abilities:

Wood Craft

Forest Concealment

Skills:

Herb lore Lvl 10, 3% to next level, 64% affinity

Alchemy Lvl 3, 14% to next level, 88% affinity

Archery Lvl 41, 71% to next level, 74% affinity
Imbue Arrow Lvl 28, 45% to next level, 88% affinity
Focus Lvl 25, 45% to next level, 82% affinity
Tracking Lvl 12 37% to next level, 77% affinity
Small Blades Lvl 18, 56% to next level, 73% affinity
Light Armor Lvl 25, 64% to next to next level, 82% affinity

Marks:

None

Resistances:

Life 10%

Earth 10%

Light 10%

Race: Wood Sprite

Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”

Alignment: +2

Languages: Sprite, Common

Interesting. Now that they were Companions, Richter could see Sion’s status page. He wasn’t sure what else being a Companion meant, but he was sure the information would reveal itself in time. Most of the skills seemed self-explanatory. He had received the Light Armor skill himself after he had donned the wood sprite armor. Sion’s advanced Archery would most likely be invaluable. Richter was also extremely interested in the Imbue Arrow skill, whatever that was. Focusing upon the skill brought up no further information. Resolving to ask the sprite about it later, Richter continued on.

They walked through the forest as the sun moved across the sky. When it began to approach the horizon, Sion stopped and examined an old

spoor on the ground. Making eye contact briefly, he motioned and then led Richter deeper into the forest, leaving the river for the first time. After moving for only ten minutes, they heard snuffling and growling noises up ahead. Slowly making their way through the trees, they climbed a hill and discovered what looked like a small cave opening. In front of it were three wolves. The largest was sleeping while the other two fought over a bone with a few scraps of meat upon it.

*You have found: **New Cave.***

Reacting to some unknown stimulus, the larger wolf looked up and stared in their direction. Richter froze, his heart beating wildly as he prepared to fight, but the wolf simply continued to scan the woods before laying its head back down. The concealment properties of his new armor seemed to be coming in handy.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Stealth**. Use your surroundings to avoid detection. Attacks made while stealthed can cause extra damage.*

You now inflict 2% greater damage during stealthed attacks. +2% to Concealment.

Huh, Richter had been wondering when this skill would show up. Back to business though, the prompt had said it was a 'New' cave. In the game, dungeons had been divided by age. New dungeons were less than a

year old. The progression was New, Young, Seasoned, Mature, Old, Timeworn, Ancient and Primordial. After Young, each stage was ten times as old: a year, ten years, a hundred years and so on. The age was how long the creatures had been there. It was usually a marker of the difficulty and loot that could be gained. It wasn't exact though. A new cave inhabited by a grand lich would be more difficult than a seasoned cave filled with rats.

Sion motioned for Richter to shoot one of the smaller wolves while he drew an arrow and aimed at the larger one. The sprite's arrow developed a blue aura and vibrated perceptibly, almost as if it wanted to shoot off the string of its own accord. Nocking his own arrow, Richter took aim at the closer of the two wolves. Easing his breathing, he waited for Sion, releasing his arrow only a moment after the sprite. The arrow streaked towards his target, hitting it broadside. The wolf collapsed to the ground. Hearing a faint boom, he looked for the larger wolf, but saw only a red mist hanging in the air. Turning quickly back, he saw the uninjured wolf darting towards him. Richter dropped his bow and drew his dagger just as it jumped towards him. Shoving his left bracer crossways into its mouth, he stabbed his blade towards the wolf's stomach. It sank its teeth into the bracer, closing its jaws with bruising force, but it was unable to penetrate the armor.

Richter's dagger sank into the wolf's underside. He withdrew his blade and stabbed once, twice, three more times before it stopped trying to

bite into him and it fell limp to the ground. Its weight pulled him down as well, the wolf's jaws locked in death. As he pried the dead animal off of his arm, he saw Sion approach the first wolf he had shot, which was struggling to get to its feet, bloody froth on its muzzle. The arrow must have punctured its lung. Sion came up behind it and, quick as thought, slid his sword into its side. The wolf gave a soft exhale and lay still.

Cleaning his sword on the wolf's pelt, Sion motioned for Richter to follow him into the cave. The sprite kept his blade held out in front of him. Richter walked behind the small man with his dagger at the ready. Just inside the mouth of the cave they found the larger wolf. They stepped over the carcass, a crater-like hole in its side. This was clearly the result of Sion's first arrow. That blue aura was most likely the sprite's Imbue Arrow skill, Richter realized. Allowing a moment for their eyes to adjust, they saw the cave was shallow and held nothing else besides the discarded bones of the wolves' kills. Richter was turning to leave, but saw Sion walking up to a patch of black moss growing along the cave ceiling. Sion slowly ran his hand along the dark tendrils until it fell off in his hands.

"How did you do that?" Richter asked curiously. "I destroyed the plants that I tried to pick."

"It is my Herb Lore skill. I doubt someone as large and clumsy as you could master it."

“Try me,” Richter said with barely constrained irritation, “or are you still not going to give me your full support?” A pregnant silence hung between the two men as they stood in the musty cave.

“Fine,” the sprite said sharply. Walking to another patch of moss, Sion started running his hands along the lichen again, speaking softer now, “You cannot simply take from nature and expect a positive result. You must connect with the life and energy in the plant. With practice this becomes easier.” He kept moving his hand along this second patch of moss while talking. “Once your energies are in sync, it is not you taking the herb from its place, but instead you moving a new part of yourself.” The moss fell away from the wall.

“There is no spoon, got it,” Richter mumbled. Walking over to a patch of moss deeper in the cave, he tried to see where he could grip it to peel it off. Placing his hand near a likely crevice, he tried to pull the moss away.

*You have picked up an **unknown plant**. Due to a lack of herbalism you have destroyed the plant. Why don't you try digging a ditch with those shovels at the end of your arms?*

Gritting his teeth for the umpteenth time since coming to this world, his mood was not improved to hear the melodic, yet condescending tone of the sprite, “I said *connect* to the plant. Do not force it. Feel the energy inside

of what you are trying to harvest.”

Moving to another moss, Richter stopped himself from ripping it off the wall in frustration. Calming himself, he placed his hand on it. He slowly ran his fingers along the length as he had seen Sion do. He closed his eyes and focused on the sensation of the soft, wet plant under his fingertips. For two hundred breaths, he stood there until he detected a faint echo. Strangely, it was more felt than heard. Immediately focusing upon it, he strained to detect it again. For another several minutes he tried desperately to connect but felt nothing. Stopping to think of another tact he relaxed his mind and in that moment the echo was back again. Without focusing too hard this time, he willed himself to be open to the feeling. After a few moments, the moss simply felt more “alive.” Placing his hand at what he now somehow knew was the right spot, he pulled lightly and the moss fell away from the cave wall into his hand.

You have found: Dark Cave Moss	Herb Class: Common. Possible Uses: You feel this moss might make you sick if you eat it.
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*You have learned the skill: **Herb Lore**. You can now find useful plants with greater ease, identify, and pick them.*

Herbs are 3% more effective. You have an increased chance of finding higher level herbs.

“Hmmm, not bad,” Sion said with a note of grudging respect.

“Is this used to make poison?” Richter asked.

“As with most things in nature it can be used to harm or heal.” Sion said with his reserved air. “Nature cannot be judged, and does not fall into petty roles of right and wrong... But yes, dark moss can be used to make poison.”

“Can you teach me how to create it?”

“It requires the skill Alchemy. Before seeing you learn Herb Lore so quickly, I would have said it was beyond you, but perhaps. Let us cleanse the forest first, and then I will try to teach you at the Hearth Tree. Now reach those other patches of dark moss along the ceiling, and we will continue our hunt.”

Richter spent the next hour collecting moss. Each time he detected the resonance of life marginally faster. He was able to collect four more dark moss before the cave was picked clean. The sun was almost setting when they exited the cave. Knowing they could not track effectively in the dark, Sion built a fire as Richter dragged the wolves’ bodies several hundred yards away. Neither of them wanted to attract more predators overnight. Coming back, he found Sion already sitting in front of the fire. Agreeing to keep watch second, Richter laid down to rest.

The night passed without incident. In the morning, Sion examined the surrounding area, quickly finding the trail that the wolves had taken to arrive at the cave. Again the two Companions moved upriver. Looking at the useless pelts of the rabid wolves, Richter shook his head in distaste at the waste of life. Reaffirming his resolve to fix this problem, he set out after the sprite. He attempted to ask about the blue glow the sprite had made around the arrow, but Sion cut him off saying it was not up for discussion.

Throughout the day, they found and killed eight more wolves, all with the distinctive look of sickened animals. Once he had killed five, he received a prompt notifying that he had completed his quest Cleanse the Forest I, and that he should return to the Hearth Mother for his reward. Even though Hisako had only asked for five wolves, his second quest, Cleanse the Forest II, required that he find out why the animals were getting sick. After making camp and spending another blessedly uneventful night, they proceeded onward.

The land grew progressively rockier as they moved upriver. They were also climbing in elevation as they approached the mountains. The further up they went, the more pine-like trees were seen. They had been walking in silence for most of the morning when Sion suddenly stopped. There was a look of severity on his face that Richter had not seen before. Taking a sniff, he looked at his human companion and quietly said one word,

“Goblin.”

Looking back at the sprite, he mouthed back “Goblin?” Sion nodded once, and then silently melded back into the foliage. Richter moved to follow him into the denser undergrowth, leaving the relatively open space on the side of the river. It was easier to walk near the bank, but it also made them a clear and obvious target. Stopping a dozen yards into the forest, Sion turned to Richter and motioned for him to wait. The sprite quickly climbed the tree they stood beside and disappeared into the leaves above. Listening intently, Richter could hear the sprite move along the branches to the next tree, using the limbs like a canopied highway. Well that’s a new trick, he thought.

Richter examined his immediate surroundings. As he looked down, he found one plant had colors that were somewhat more vibrant than those surrounding it. Reaching down, he ran his hand along its length. It had yellow flowers that shot off to the sides and a deep purple bud on top that had yet to open. As he slowed his breathing, he felt he could visualize the entire organism in his mind, not just the portion that was visible. He could feel the leaves, the flowers, and the roots. He made the connection, and again instinctively knew to loosen the soil lightly around it, grasp below the level of the flowers, and then twist and pull in a clockwise direction. It easily came free from the dirt.

*Congratulations! You have advanced to level 2 in **Herb Lore**. Herbs are 6%*

more effective. You have an increased chance of finding higher level herbs.

You have found:
Tiger Lily

Herb Class: Common.
Possible Uses: . The colors of the flowers make you think of the warming heat of the sun.

Pleased with himself, he laid the tiger lily to the side. After he dismissed the screens from his vision, he once again decided to wait patiently. After about an hour, he heard a rustling above him and Sion dropped to the ground. The sprite pulled a rusty knife from his belt and showed it to Richter.

“I found a goblin scout. I was able to kill him quietly, but if there is one scout, then there are others. Hopefully, it was just part of a hunting party from the Azergoth Swamp, but I do not like the timing of finding that foul creature while we are hunting these sick animals. We need to hunt and destroy them before they set up an encampment. Will you fight with me?”

*You have been offered a Quest: **Cleanse the Forest III**. Sion suspects a connection between the sickness infecting the animals and the goblins. He feels that the two of you must kill the goblins that have invaded the Forest of Nadria. Reward: Increased relationship with Sion. A new Skill. Yes or No?*

So the third link in the quest chain, huh? Richter had been expecting that the rabid animals were coming from a poisoned bog, or a type of insect

that spread sickness. He didn't really see how the goblins could be connected, but the fact that he had gotten another quest showed there must be some relationship. It would also be great to get a new skill, whatever that would be. Maybe he could even ask for a specific skill...

"I said I would help cleanse the forest and I will," Richter replied.

"You must be stronger than you are then. The damage you can cause is not enough to overcome these enemies. We must come up with something else."

"Can you teach me how you make your arrows explode when they hit?"

Sion shook his head. "That is a race specific skill that only the sprites have. It was a blessing of the Forest, and the will of Nature. Humans cannot learn it."

"That might not be a problem. I am not like every other human you have met. Just try." Seeing Sion's stubborn reluctance, Richter added, "Please."

Sion took a deep breath and said, "I will attempt to teach the skill if you will swear never to use it against my people."

"I promise you that as long as you and your people do not break faith with me, then I will act the same."

Sion looked at him long and hard, but ultimately said, “Very well. I can accept that. I still do not believe this will work, but I will do my best, so listen. You must imagine your mana flowing into the arrow. As in Herb lore, this is a partnership. Accept the arrow as a part of you and let your mana flow into it. Use caution though. This skill can damage you as well. Once you have imbued the arrow, the energy cannot be taken back, it must be released. Never forget that. You must also know that the mana makes the structure of the arrow unstable. The more mana, the greater the instability, the more powerful the strike, and the less time you have to fire. Waiting too long will make the arrow explode on the string. Do not wait too long to fire or YOU will suffer the effects of the explosion. Are you ready to try?”

Richter was suddenly a bit less eager to do this. It sounded like Sion was saying the arrow turned into a stick of dynamite. He had to light the fuse and just hope it didn’t go off too soon. Despite his misgivings, Richter knew he would try. There was no denying the power of the imbued attack. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. Richter nocked his bow and tried to imagine his mana extending from himself and into the arrow. Even after several long minutes, he met with no success. Sion saw the difficulty Richter was having and said, “Imagine the mana as a field around your body, both imperceptibly thin and massively powerful. Feel that field surround the arrow, and once it does simply channel more power into the part of your aura

that encompasses the arrow.”

Trying again, he did as Sion suggested. Richter closed his eyes, and let his other senses expand. He relaxed his mind in the same manner as when he used Herb Lore to connect with the life force of plants. Rather than trying to connect outward, though, he allowed himself to gaze inward. After a time, he felt he could see his aura as the color of sunlight, but also with streaks of a rich black, like old gold streaked with ebony. Once the visualization stayed in his mind for more than a few moments, he tried extending this field to encompass the arrow. He held the image in his head until he felt a peculiar sensation of stretching, of suddenly being a bit “more.” Opening his eyes, he could swear he saw a gold tinge around the arrow for the briefest second.

*You have learned the subskill: **Imbue Arrow**. You can now imbue arrows with part of your mana to increase the damage of that shot. This is a subskill of archery.*

+5% Damage. +5% Speed of Mana Flow.

Not wanting to blow up he quickly shot the arrow at a nearby tree, and ducked and covered his face. He didn’t hear an explosion, but did hear Sion laughing at him. “You didn’t actually put any mana into that arrow, Richter. You did manage to extend your aura, but next time let the mana flow as well. If it’s any consolation, I’m sure that tree over there is thankful.

Hahaha!”

Richter looked at Sion, expecting to see a disdainful gaze to go along with the sprite’s teasing. For the first time though, he saw an expression other than contempt. It was there and gone too fast to recognize, but he would have sworn it was respect if he didn’t know that was impossible from the angry sprite.

Actions speak louder than words. Learning Imbue Arrow has impressed Sion more than any conversation could have. The fact that you can learn a skill that until now has been unique to his people has allayed many of his suspicions.

*Congratulations! You have gained **+4,768 Relationship Points** with **Sion**! Your relationship with the **Sion** has improved from **Distrust (-5,000)** to **Irritable (-250)**. “Your bothering me.”*

*Total Relationship Points with the Sion: **-317**.*

The sprite looked Richter in the eye, “Imbue Arrow is a blessed skill of the Forest. The fact that you have been favored to learn it may mean that you are not all bad. Either way, this is a good start,” Sion said.

He scanned the sky, gauging the time of day, “We will rest here for the rest of the day. You should practice your new skill, while I prepare some poison for our arrowheads using the dark moss.”

Sion sat on the ground and pulled a small mortar and pestle from the pack he carried. He set the wooden bowl in front of him and poured a small amount of water to the bottom of the bowl. The sprite threw in some moss and began to grind it into a paste. Looking up at Richter, the sprite wolfishly bared his teeth, “Tomorrow, we hunt goblins.”

CHAPTER 7 – Day 4 – Sanren 24, 15,368 ABG



They left just before dawn, stalking silently through the forest. Richter found that he startled far fewer animals since donning the Wood Sprite armor. Though he still made considerably more noise than Sion in comparison to before, he moved like a ghost through the trees. The night before, they had decided to follow the path Sion had taken to find the goblin scout, reasoning that this was probably the best place to start looking for the rest of the green skinned creatures. Searching around, Sion easily found the trail again. He motioned for Richter to proceed slowly forward, while he climbed into the trees and moved along in the same direction.

The air smelled clean with the scent of pine needles and the brief rain that had fallen the night before. As Richter moved forward, his nose was filled with the comforting smells of nature. The sounds of the forest waking helped to calm his nerves, which had been on edge as they stalked a potentially deadly opponent. He made his way through the forest, trusting his small companion to stop him before he ran into anything dangerous. Several plants caught his eyes during the morning's march. By this point, he knew

that meant they would be useful in some way. He had to pass them by, regrettably; the need for speed was all important at the current moment. His appreciation, however, for his new Herb Lore skill increased.

Slowly stalking through the forest for thirty to forty minutes, he came to a halt when Sion dropped down beside him. “There are four of them up ahead, all scouts,” the sprite said softly.

Moving to the left, they circled around the area Sion had indicated. When they crossed a rocky outcropping, Sion gestured that the goblins were on the other side. Looking around the corner of a small boulder, Richter got his first sight of goblins. Three-and-a-half to four feet tall, each was clad in rags and ratty furs. They were green with greasy black or grey hair that sprouted in wisps plastered to their heads. Fangs protruded from their mouths in either an overbite or underbite. They each had a rusty dagger or small club, and were sitting around a fire roasting what appeared to be a large fox, bickering with each other.

Sion looked at Richter, “Give me a count to fifty while I move to the other side of them. Then power your arrow and hit the ugly one with the club.”

“I haven’t Imbued successfully yet,” Richter replied in a soft hiss.

“It is time to man up then,” Sion said. “One day you might be good

enough to sprite up,” he added with a smirk.

“Fine, let’s do this. But which one is the ugly one?”

“Exactly,” the Sprite said maintaining his smug expression, and then blended into the woods.

Clearing his mind, Richter waited patiently. After the required time had elapsed, he nocked an arrow and extended his aura. Counting his heartbeats, he tried to let his mana flow into the arrow. A golden hue began to surround it, flickering in and out. Taking aim at the goblin whose back was to him, he let his arrow fly. His mana had not successfully filled the arrow. The golden glow went out as soon as the arrow left the string, but luckily it still struck the goblin in the back. Despite his failure to imbue the arrow, the surprise nature of the attack still magnified the damage. The green skinned creature fell to the ground shrieking. The other three goblins jumped to their feet, and began to move toward him, snarls on their faces.

A split second later, a blue streak struck one of the goblins in the back with explosive force. Its chest exploded outward, and blood spattered onto the ground in front of Richter. The blast momentarily disoriented the remaining two, creating an opportunity. A second arrow from Richter struck a goblin in the leg, while another blue streak ended the life of the last standing goblin. Before the hobbled goblin could rise again, an arrow from

Richter's bow found its throat. The small creature swiftly drowned in its own black blood. Sion rushed toward the remaining goblin, sword drawn, prepared to end the fight.

"Wait!" Richter shouted.

With a sneer on his face, Sion asked "Why?"

"We need to know why they are here and how many there are. I can understand what it is saying. We just need to get it to talk."

"That won't be a problem," Sion said with a grim voice.

After the interrogation, they finally silenced the goblin. Digesting what the ugly green creature had shared, they looked at each other, daunted by the task in front of them. These four were simply the tip of the spear. A large company of goblins had made their way into the Forest of Nadria led by a goblin chieftain that the scout had only called "Big Red." Richter's comment that cinnamon was always troublesome was met by only a confused glance from Sion. He shook his head. The ignorance of the sprite was causing his Companion to miss out on comedic genius.

Sion had been more than surprised by what they had learned. He explained that goblins did not typically band together in large raids. Apparently, the green skinned humanoids were naturally combative. Usually, they could not be held together in groups larger than eight or twelve before

they fell to infighting. It was true that there were large enclaves of goblins in the swamps and mountains, but Sion said they were typically lawless settlements where murder was a common pastime. It was almost unheard of for large numbers of goblins to cooperate when away from these settlements.

Sion admitted that, occasionally, a leader strong enough or vicious enough rose to power and forced minor tribes to band together. What was concerning was that it seemed this was what they faced. Apparently, this Big Red had forced several smaller bands to serve him. The exact number they still didn't know. Not for lack of trying or unwillingness of the scout to "cooperate," but large numbers had simply been beyond the intellect of the goblin. The creature's counting system had been limited to "one," "two," "lots" and then "lots and lots." Apparently the goblin chief had gathered "lots," and was in the forest searching a dungeon for an item of power. It would apparently make Big Red strong enough to gather "lots and lots" of goblins.

The mystery of the rabid wolves was still just that, a mystery, but the goblin had revealed that there was a magic user that worked closely with the chief. The scout hadn't been able to describe what type of magic the mage could employ, but Sion told Richter that goblin mages were often involved with Death or Dark magic.

Richter looked at Sion, "Do you have any idea where this dungeon

could be?” The goblin scout had just indicated it was somewhere north of their location.

Shaking his head, the sprite replied, “We are getting closer to the boundaries of the forest. The human Kingdom of Yves lies several weeks’ journey to the west, the Serrated Mountains are a week’s journey north, the Azergoth Swamp is a slightly farther journey to the northeast, and the Fire Tip Mountains are to the southeast. My people do not come this far north, normally. We prefer the deep forest. The goblin indicated it came from somewhere to the north and east, however. Let’s just start moving in that direction. If the band is as big as it described, I will find traces of them.”

Searching the bodies, they left the knives and clubs as useless. They did find three silver and seven copper coins in various pouches, however. Sion had no interest in money it seemed and he motioned for Richter to keep them.

Tying one of the pouches to his waist, Richter somehow felt better having money in his proverbial “pocket” again. Even if he did have to shake bits of goblin off of the pouch. He smiled, thinking to himself, This Georgia boy just might turn into a cutthroat capitalist, literally.

When The Land had just been a game, one copper had been the equivalent of one US dollar. A silver was worth ten dollars and a gold coin

was a cool C-note. If the ratios stayed the same, it meant he had just killed four people for thirty-seven dollars. Richter wasn't sure that his mom would be proud, but what was done, was done.

Sion took the lead again, and the two men walked north through the forest. They kept the river in sight, but stayed to the deeper woods, reasoning that they could be running into more bands of goblins if they were moving in the right direction. While they had dealt with that band of scouts with little difficulty, Sion assured him that those would be the weakest of the opponents they would face.

As they traveled, Richter continued focusing his aura around the arrow, but didn't try to actually invest any mana. He was extremely cognizant of Sion's warning of exploding his own arrows. The act of extending his aura was easier than the day before, but it still remained to be seen if he could perform under pressure. For a moment, he wished that he had more of the blue forest berries to help his concentration. After a moment of introspection and pride however, he decided he did not want to rely on anything small and blue to help his performance... at least not yet.

Throughout the day, they encountered a few more wolves, which they quickly dispatched. Sion also detected a band of six goblins, thankfully before the creatures saw them. They decided to bypass this group, and stayed concealed in the underbrush while they walked by. Four of the goblins looked

like the scouts they had already encountered, but there were two slightly larger goblins in the group with rusty cutlasses and leather breastplates. Sion identified these as goblin warriors. Apparently they were stronger, meaner and slightly smarter. The two Companions waited about ten minutes after the patrol passed before continuing on. Even though it was a small delay, they were both heartened by the proof that they were moving in the right direction. They made camp for the night at the base of a large tree, deciding to forgo a fire. The low-lying shrubs combined with the natural concealment of their armor made detection extremely unlikely. They passed the night without incident.

Sion continued to slowly lead the way for the next three days. Over that time, they noticed goblin patrols with increasing regularity, always between four and seven strong. They stayed hidden in the trees each time until the goblins passed. It was slow work, but it did let him increase his Stealth skill to level three. It seemed strange to him that Sion did not have a stealth skill, but he assumed it must be because the sprite had a concealment ability.

Early on the third day, Sion came back from ranging ahead and told Richter that he had found the main encampment. It was in a ruin about fifteen minutes away. Moving even slower now that they were so close, they crept along until activity could clearly be heard. Climbing into a tall tree to the

south of the ruin, they were rewarded with a clear view. The remains of white stone walls could be seen ringing a compound the size of a large town.

Richter saw dilapidated dwellings made of the same stone scattered about with grass growing up unchecked. It was clear that whomever had lived here had been gone for decades if not centuries.

The village sat on a small plateau halfway up a large hill. Mountains rose high above the village to the north. Just to the north, a waterfall fell down a cliff face creating a lake in the hills beyond the village. That lake, in turn, spilled down along its southern edge, creating a second waterfall that formed a small river to the west of the ruins. A second tributary came from the base of the hill. This small waterway extended back into the cliff face through a large crack in the stone. The two ribbons of water joined and then traced their way back into the forest. Presumably, the small river rejoined the larger one they had been following for the past several days.

Near the back of the compound rose an isolated shelf of stone. A rise in the land created an easy slope up to the stone, ending in a large cave face. Arrayed at the bottom of this slope was where they found the goblin camp. Dozens of goblins huddled around campfires arguing, fighting, defecating and fornicating wherever they wished. Richter was no cryptozoologist, but it didn't *seem* like there were any girl goblins down there. Well, he thought, as long as they were making love on each other, they weren't making war on

him so... play on playa.

Despite some of the lewd acts they were observing, what was truly offensive was the smell. Even at a distance, the odor was staggering. It was like a pig farm and a frat bathroom had a baby, and then that baby ate expired Velveeta. Choking back nausea, he and Sion backed away into the forest again. They walked for several minutes, until finding a stand of close-growing trees that easily hid them from view.

“How do we do this?” Richter asked once they were safely away.

“There is no way we can fight that many at once,” Sion replied, catching his meaning. “We must slowly whittle them down.”

“How?” Richter asked with a faint tone of frustration. “Their patrols are already too strong. With the element of surprise, we can maybe destroy one or two patrols before they become wary, but that would still leave dozens of goblins.”

“Do you want to quit?” Sion asked caustically.

“No! I have already told you I am committed to finishing this, but we need a good plan.”

Sion looked frustrated as well, but did not offer an argument. They sat there thinking as the sun passed overhead. No solution presented itself for long hours. Evening was approaching and Richter was getting up to relieve

himself when, looking around the trees which hid them, several plants caught his attention. One reminded him of the dark moss.

“How much poison can you make, and how potent is it?” Richter asked.

Sion thought for a moment, “All we have with us is the dark moss. It causes weakness and dazes creatures when struck with an arrow coated in its extract. Even if we could shoot every goblin though, the poison would only kill the weakest among them hours later, and by that time the rest would be hunting us.”

“What if we got them to eat it? They had that massive pot cooking in the middle of their camp. If we could poison their food, it might give us the edge we need.”

Sion scratched his face thoughtfully, “Perhaps. But to make a truly potent poison I would need a few other ingredients. Let me search the forest. Stay here.”

After the sprite had disappeared into the greenery, Richter looked around and spent some time picking the few plants that caught his attention. He was ultimately able to pick three arrowroot flowers and two forest sage, which gave him feelings of stamina and health respectively. Afterwards he sat and focused upon his aura manipulation, trusting in his camouflage to

protect him. A few patrols came close enough for him to hear them, but no one came close to his hiding place. Several hours passed as he meditated, awaiting his Companion's return.

When Sion did come back to the copse of trees, night had fallen. The now familiar vicious grin was back on the sprite's face.

"I assume you found what you were looking for?"

"And so much more," the sprite said excited. "Nightshade, Death Flower AND Shadowbane. We will melt those foul smelling interlopers from the inside out." With that pleasant image, Sion immediately took out his mortar and pestle to begin preparing the poison. Richter wasn't sure at first, but the bloodthirsty Disneyland reject was actually humming.

CHAPTER 8 – Day 8 – Sanren 28, 15,368 ABG



Sion worked through the night and into the next day, storing his poison in small clay jugs covered in animal hide that he took from his pack. It took several tries to successfully make the doses of poison and Richter grew used to Sion cursing expansively. Ultimately, only a small quantity of poison was produced, but Sion assured him it would be enough. Finishing in late afternoon, the sprite sat back, massaging his tired arms. Richter decided it was time to share the last phase of his plan. “Killing these lesser goblins is probably not going to change much. We need to kill the Chief, and it seems reasonable to assume its magician may be responsible for the rabid wolves, so it will have to die as well. Those two need to be our goal above anything else.”

Sion nodded, “While I was collecting the herbs, I was able to observe their camp several times. I never saw a red goblin come out, but when they all began eating, a few goblins went inside the cave with bowls of food. All the other goblins ate after that. They were probably bringing food to their chief and his pet magician. We need to get the poison in their wretched stew

just before they prepare to eat their evening meal, to catch as many of them as possible. There will still be the patrols that are out of camp at dinnertime, though. They won't be sickened, but we will have a window to act. Now, it is time for you to tell me the last part of your plan. How do we get the poison into the pot?"

"Well," Richter replied. "Depending on your perspective, this is actually the easiest part. The pot is right below a large tree. That tree grows out of the shelf of stone that the cave is set in. The shelf is well covered with foliage and small shrubbery that leads all the way to the edge of the encampment and into the forest."

Sion nodded, being well familiar with the layout of the camp.

"Now," Richter said with a barely concealed smile, "when you climb out onto the tree branch..."

An hour later, Sion was still cursing the stupid human and his own greater stupidity for agreeing to this horrible plan. As much as he wanted to plant an arrow in Richter though, he had not come up with a better idea of how the two of them could kill more than fifty goblins. He moved along the escarpment not ten feet above the grunting goblins, hearing a mixture of common speak and their own guttural tongue. Sion moved slowly. Despite his justified faith in his concealment skills, one stumble or loose rock would

mean his death. If they were able to subdue him rather than kill him outright... well it did not bear thinking about. Goblins were the racial enemies of the wood sprites, and tales of their savagery kept many a sprite child up late into the night.

Keeping one eye on the goblins and the other on where to find his next hand or foothold, he moved along the rocky shelf until reaching the tree. He climbed up the trunk and then out onto its limbs, grateful for the added cover of the large leaves. Sion slowly crawled out onto the branch above the stew pot. Looking down, the sprite saw too many eyes looking at the pot in anticipation, and dared not drop the jar of poison at this point. He and Richter had agreed that the return of a patrol would provide the best distraction. Waiting on the tree limb, he attempted to ignore the burn from the fire twenty feet below, and removed the stoppers from both clay pots. As he slowly warmed, he vowed to repay that wretched human for this. He had seen that poorly concealed smile on Richter's stupid, large face.

Luckily, Sion did not need to wait too much longer. There was a clamor to the south of the camp as a group of seven goblins returned, blathering loudly about whatever stupid thing they had found on their patrol. Sion never would have thought he would be happy about the inane babbling of goblins, but it worked to distract the rest of the camp for a few seconds. In those moments of misdirection, he dropped the two jars of poison he had

prepared. He held his breath during the short fall, praying his aim was true. Success! Both jars dropped into the pot. They quickly sank, thanks to the stones he had placed in each jar to increase their weight. Some poison had fallen out upon striking the surface of the soup, but luckily whatever vile ingredients the goblins had found to make their stew left an oily surface. The dark color of the poison he had prepared could not be distinguished in the firelight. He started the slow climb back to the safety of the forest, and began to silently curse that damn human again.

Sion made his way back to the stand of trees that had been hiding them for the last day without issue. They waited for another hour, and then cautiously made their way back to the encampment. When they got there, they realized they could have broken every branch they found along the way, and they would not have been detected. The stench of the camp had been increased five-fold. The bowels of every goblin present had been released from both ends, and almost all were on the ground groaning. Richter looked at Sion expecting to see another bloodthirsty grin, but all he saw on the Sprite's face was grim resolve. "I take no joy in slaughter," Sion said, arching his back and rolling his shoulders, "but I will not shy from it either."

They nocked arrows to their bows and began. It took very little skill to strike the goblins since they were barely moving targets. They had decided not to imbue their first shots for several reasons. One, to keep the

encampment from knowing their position as long as possible. Two, neither had enough mana to imbue the amount of arrows that would have been required for all of their targets. Three, Sion had coated all of their arrows with even more poison.

Luckily, they should have more than enough arrows. Hisako had given them several dozen each prior to leaving the Hearth Tree. In the night, the arrows were nearly invisible. The *whsst* sound they made as they cut through the air was not loud enough to attract the attention of the goblins. Not when the green creatures were already mired in their own personal hell. At near point blank range, their shots struck necks and chests center mass. Apparently the goblins' sickness and position qualified them as helpless, because it seemed to Richter there were an inordinate amount of critical hits. That coupled with the damage the poison had already done meant one arrow was usually enough to finish each goblin.

They killed ten in as many seconds, though Sion racked up far more frags. Fifteen more goblins died before the camp at large became aware of them. Even then the cries of alarm were ignored for a few critical moments, being mistaken for the already existing moans of pain. By the time there was a coordinated counter-attack, they had killed more than half of the goblins, leaving between fifteen to twenty scouts and warriors. As the goblins began to move towards the two archers, Richter's shots grew more erratic, some

missing, others hitting limbs, but few striking critical points. Sion though, was able to strike three more, this time infusing the strikes with mana. The scouts' smoking chests made clear that they would not rise again.

The first scout reached Richter and he smashed it in the face with the end of his bow. Stepping forward to give Sion the time to make a few more precious shots, he raised his knife and slashed at the next goblin. It ducked, sending a vicious swipe of its own knife back at him. His longer reach kept the scout from reaching him with its blade, but several more were right behind it. A third scout grabbed his right leg and held tight. With the decreased mobility, Richter was not able to move out of range of the one he was already fighting.

The goblin scout dove towards him, a blade in his outstretched hand. The green creature managed a shallow cut on Richter's left leg. Hunching over slightly, Richter drove the pommel of his knife into the head of the goblin holding his right leg. The goblin loosened his grip. At the same time, Richter grabbed the other goblin by the shirt and pulled forward. The small attacker fell over easily, off balance after its lunge. Richter quickly stabbed down into the goblin's green neck causing a spurt of blackish blood, then whipped his blade at the goblin holding him. It went down wailing and holding its face. Seeing three more almost upon him, he fell back. Scooping up his bow he turned to run, shouting in sprite speak, "Fade back to the trees,

we will thin them there.”

A final blue streak shot right above his head, and elicited a squeal of pain behind him. Sion had been able to kill two others during Richter’s brief knife fight. That left about ten on their feet. Furious expressions were on the goblins’ faces. Running as fast as he could, he saw Sion join him on the right, the sprite’s legs pumping as quickly as possible. The run was dangerous. Clouds obscured the sky and even when there was a break, only two crescent moons could be seen. Obstacles were only given partial definition as they ran past. They continued on for a couple minutes easily increasing their lead on the sick goblins. Before the attack, Sion had found a clearing. They had marked it as a retreat point and it was where they were headed now. Once it was in sight, Richter turned his head and shouted in sprite speak, “Go up in the trees. I’ll make a stand on the other side. When they run past you, start firing.”

Nodding, Sion ran for another half-minute and then jumped to a low-lying branch, scurrying up into the tree with his uncanny swiftness. Turning back, Richter checked his quiver, finding only two arrows left. This might be bad, he thought. Taking a deep breath, he centered himself and looked back in the direction of their pursuit. Only a few moments passing before the first of the goblins became visible through the trees. Seeing their quarry again, they screamed in rage, their bloodlust giving them the strength to ignore their

sickness from the poison, if only momentarily. Two scouts ran ahead of the others, blind in their bloodlust.

Richter watched them approach, waiting for a clear shot. He didn't release his first shot until the scout was only twenty yards away. Now was not a time for subtlety and he chose not to risk aiming for a critical shot to the head. Instead he targeted the goblin's chest. The arrow punched all the way through his target and the arrowhead exploded from the green skinned scout's back. His attacker was knocked back several feet and crumpled to the ground. The scout squealed out its last breaths, reminding Richter of the noise his uncle's horse had made when it broke its leg in a rabbit hole. Pushing aside the horrible sound, he nocked and drew his last arrow.

The shot fired at a second scout at point blank range. The goblin caught the arrow high in the left chest, and its next breath turned into a bloody cough. The scout's forward momentum continued and the body crashed into Richter as the goblin shook in its death throes. Richter shoved the small body to the side and stomped down once. A sharp crack issued from the goblin's neck and that was the end of the creature's pitiful cries.

Looking up, Richter saw the remaining five, no six goblins coming within sight range in the waning light. Unfortunately, there appeared to be three goblin warriors in the group. Unstringing his bow, he held the curved four and half feet of wood in one hand with his dagger in the other. Looking

at the green skinned devils, with black blood dripping down his face, the putrid taste of it having worked its way into his mouth at some point, Richter's nostrils flared as he screamed, "Come on then!"

Screaming back with equal rage, they moved forward en masse. As soon as they passed the tree that hid Sion, a blue streak shot down and pierced one warrior through the shoulder. The force of the blow tore the goblin's arm completely off. The warrior fell to the ground, screaming. spurts of black arterial blood escaped into the air as the fallen brute felt in vain for his missing limb, the grim reality not yet setting in. In as many moments, a second and third arrow struck another soldier in the back and a scout in the head. It did not escape Richter's notice that the second arrow had barely any concussive force, though it did knock the warrior onto its face. The third arrow, while deadly, had no blue tinge at all. The sprite had finally run out of mana.

Having revealed his position, it was easy for the last warrior to target Sion. The goblin threw his heavy dagger into the tree, and though Richter couldn't see the impact, he heard a cry of pain. The sprite's body hit the ground with a thud, apparently stunned for a moment as he did not immediately get up. The dagger was sticking out of his shoulder. The warrior pulled an iron headed cudgel from his belt and moved toward where Sion's body had fallen.

Not willing to let his comrade be executed, Richter started forward swinging his bow in a large arc at the three scouts that were converging on him. The first two ducked out of the way, but he clipped the last, sending the bastard spinning to the side.

In quick response, the first scout drove its dagger into the meat of Richter's thigh, sending a blaze of agony through him. The second goblin swung a club into his chest, but thankfully the smaller creature lacked the strength to overcome the defense of his chest plate. Though the blow hurt, Richter suffered no damage. Grabbing the arm of the goblin that held the knife, he kept him from withdrawing its blade from his leg and he drove his own bronze dagger down into his enemy's neck. The weapon was too weak to bite very deep, but when Richter withdrew the blade, it was clear he had struck a major vessel. More black blood sprayed across his face in a strong jet. A look of profound shock appeared on the dying goblin's face as the small creature opened and closed its mouth quickly with only blood escaping.

The goblin fell, releasing its grip on the dagger. The damage was already done, though. 20% of Richter's health was gone. The chaos seed's leg failed, causing him to collapse to the side. This might have been all that saved him. The third goblin that had been struck by his bow at the start of the melee had gotten quickly back to his feet. The furious scout jumped towards Richter but his sudden collapse caused it to miss.

Richter and the two remaining scouts landed together in a heap. With a short and strong surge, Richter rolled himself up on top of them, plunging his dagger down again and again. He screamed unintelligibly, roaring his defiance and dominance. For a few seconds, he was lost in the black haze of their blood and his own pain and rage. Coming back to himself, he saw the ruin of meat beneath him and he remembered his Companion. Richter looked, stricken, in the direction of the goblin warrior, expecting to see it holding a cudgel slick with the sprite's blood and brain matter. He could not have been more wrong.

Sion was on his feet. He and the goblin warrior wove back and forth in a deadly dance. The sprite's thorn-like sword darted in and out, trying to skewer the goblin as the warrior's cudgel swung in strong arcs attempting to crush the smaller fighter. The sprite's advantage was his speed, but he was clearly pained by the dagger sticking out of his shoulder. The goblin had greater size and strength, but the poison must have slowed it down considerably as its motions seemed somewhat sluggish.

Moving forward to help his comrade, Richter limped across the clearing as quickly as he could. Before making it halfway though, the fight concluded. Feinting forward, Sion immediately leaned back again. The overhand swing of the goblin's weapon just missed the sprite's head before it struck the ground solidly. In that half second of overextension, Sion stepped

inside of the goblin's guard. Almost delicately, he drove his sword under the warrior's chin and up into the fighter's brain. Sion stared into his fallen foe in the eye for a moment until the spark of light died. Then he withdrew his sword and stepped back, letting the body slump to the ground.

The two Companions looked at each other, surrounded by a charnel house of their own creation. The horrid images did not reach them though, as both were still caught in the embrace of bloodlust and pain. The death and gore registered no more than a second place runner registered to a gold medalist at the end of a race. They were still standing. Breathing heavily through their pain, they looked each other in the eye and Richter verbalized what was on both of their minds, "Let's finish this."

They both used Richter's healing ring once each. The magic was enough to close their major wounds and to stop the bleeding though neither was at full strength. They also both consumed forest sage, which Sion had confirmed was a basic healing herb. Retrieving what arrows they could, they hastened to get back to the encampment, and then up to the cave upon the hill. They had not forgotten time was limited to kill the goblin chief before any patrols made their way back. Though the fight had been intense and painful, it had barely lasted fifteen minutes. If they did not waste time, they might still accomplish their goal. Richter picked up a sword dropped by a goblin warrior on the way back to the ruin. Checking its stats as he walked,

he was underwhelmed.

You have received: Crude Goblin Cutlass	Attack: Damage 2-4 (Max 5-6) Durability: 7/12 Item Class: Common. Quality: Poor. Weight: 1.9 kg.
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It did supplement his bronze dagger, however, which was down to a durability of 4/20. Arriving back at the encampment, they made their way through the bodies, quickly ending the lives of any of the goblins still breathing. As they went about their grim work, one tense moment did arise. A warrior that had been feigning injury turned quickly as they passed and drove a short sword towards Richter's stomach. The chaos seed knocked the blade aside with his bracer, however, and Sion stabbed the warrior through the throat. Looking down, Richter spit upon its dead body and then picked up the short sword.

You have received: Soldier's Short Sword	Attack: Damage 7-9 Durability: 26/30 Item Class: Common Quality: Average Weight: 1.5
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"Thanks, asshole," Richter said with contempt, dropping the inferior cutlass he had been carrying.

It didn't take long to reach the mouth of the cave. They both looked at each other wearily. Sion peered at Richter directly in the face, saying, "We are now brothers in blood. Though I am not immortal like you seem to be, my soul is. If it is my time to rejoin the Universe, then I will do it gladly if it removes this threat to my people."

Nodding back, Richter said, "It is noble to die for your people, but I say, let's make these bastards die for theirs."

A grin on his face showed blood-streaked teeth as Sion smiled back crazily. With that, they entered the darkness.

CHAPTER 9 – Day 9 – Sanren 29, 15,368 ABG



“How much mana do you have left?” Richter asked.

“I’ve managed to recover about thirty-five points. Enough to imbue two or three arrows or one very strong strike.”

Richter absorbed this information silently. At his current state, his Wisdom had only ten points. That equated to one mana point regenerated every ten seconds. Sion’s Wisdom had fifteen points, which would increase mana regeneration but not by much. The risks of waiting for full regeneration outweighed the benefits though, when those roving patrols of goblins were factored in. And so, the two Companions made their way forward into what was clearly not a natural formation. Though the outside looked like rough-hewn stone, the inside of the cave showed tight-fitting blocks comprising a hallway of grey marble. Richter could only imagine that the opening, having been exposed to the elements, had eroded over time, while deeper into the structure, the original architecture had been preserved.

Their footsteps echoed as they moved forward. There was a sense of heaviness and age to the place. It was clear from the lack of trash and offal

that not even the goblins had the nerve to disrespect this hallowed hall. They listened intently, but heard no signs of life. The sun had set as they had made their way back to the encampment, but it would not have mattered if it was noon on a clear day. Sunlight had clearly never reached the depths of these passages. Using a torch taken from the goblin encampment, they moved forward in a small sphere of flickering light, the entire rest of the world seemingly draped in darkness.

They walked for several hundred yards, steadily going deeper as the floor sloped downward. After a final turn of the hallway, they walked into a large gallery. The ceiling reached more than a hundred feet into the air, and multiple hallways branched out irregularly from the roughly circular room. All of this was of less importance, however, than the room's occupants. They had finally found their quarry. In the middle of the room, there stood a large goblin with a reddish hue to his green skin. There was a second slightly taller figure reclining against a large mound.

The goblin chief was just over four feet tall and powerfully built. It wore leather boots and a tunic made of poorly sewn-together animal skins. Over this was a chain mail shirt with a large rent in the side, most likely created when the chief had killed the previous owner. A large axe was by its side and a buckler hung from its arm. It leaned heavily upon its weapon, and glared with all of the animosity its weakened body would allow.

Big Red's companion was five feet tall or would have been if it were not hunched over. The figure was covered in black robes. Dark splotches gave a matted look to the rough material in places, giving that blacker-than-black appearance that is only imparted by congealed blood. It had sickly, mustard yellow skin and was completely bald. The face was more human than the other goblins, but its beady eyes imparted the same malicious glare as the goblins. The deep wrinkles on its face gave the appearance of old age. The yellow goblin held a staff in one hand with a small animal skull attached to the top. Red veins glowed along its black length, the color throbbing at the pace of a measured heartbeat.

“Hobgoblin,” Sion spat.

The mage nodded, a smug smile on its face. It was the chief who spoke in guttural but clearly understood common tongue, “Why are you here? Why has a human allied with this forest rat?”

“You are in the Forest of Nadria, filth!” Sion shouted back. “Answer instead why you, a fire goblin from the mountain tribes has come to sully this ancient place. What is your purpose?”

A raspy chuckle came from the hobgoblin. With a loud, breathy whisper, sounding like the crumpling of old parchment, it said, “Have you forgotten so quickly? Have your people forgotten so easily the Places of

Power that exist in the world? We are here with a glorious purpose. To reawaken forces and corrupt them. We will cleanse the Forest of —*Urghk!*”

All Richter saw was a blue flicker, and then the hobgoblin’s body was flying backward. Looking to his right, Sion shrugged, “When you have to shoot, shoot, don’t talk.”

Guess that makes me Eastwood, Richter thought with a grin, drawing his own arrow and firing at the goblin chief. The chief blocked with its buckler, clearly not easy prey like the dead goblins outside the cave. Richter drew again, confident that the two of them could overcome the sickened goblin, but then the mound that the hobgoblin had leaned against turned around. Richter was suddenly staring into the bloodshot eyes and frothed muzzle of a rabid cave bear. You have got to be kidding me. That was Richter’s repeating thought as he began to launch arrow after arrow at the bear. Unfortunately, his short bow lacked the power to deeply penetrate the bear’s body.

Richter dodged to the side as the rabid animal took a swipe at him with its massive paw. Despite his efforts, it still caught him in the side and flung him several feet through the air. He landed hard, losing fifteen percent of his health from a glancing strike. Rolling with the blow, he regained his feet only to see an axe head swinging at him from the left. Falling on his backside again, he felt a brush of air on his face as the axe passed only a

finger length over his head. Dropping his bow, he drew and threw his dagger in a weak underhanded toss towards the goblin chief's face. The buckler again moved to block the strike, knocking the projectile to the ground.

The distraction allowed Richter to regain his feet and draw his short sword. He began to swing his blade with an untrained, but furious barrage at the goblin chief. He had to hope that Sion could occupy the bear. The boom he heard from his right followed by a roar of pain and anger gave him hope for a respite from the animal. As he rained blows upon his foe, it was clear that the poison had taken a toll. A particularly heavy blow drove the chief down to one knee. Grabbing the buckler attached to the goblin's right forearm, he pulled the chief forward, off-balance. The goblin fell to an awkward stance on all fours, one shoulder higher as it braced the buckler against the ground.

The goblin chief's prone position offered Richter the opportunity he needed. With his stamina lowered to 30%, he reversed his grip on the short sword and drove the blade down through the goblin's back. The two feet of blade penetrated the chainmail covering Big Red and sank down until only a few inches remained free. The chief shuddered and then died.

Turning to his right, Richter saw Sion running from the bear. The sprite was quickly losing ground. Scooping up the axe he threw it with all of his strength. The weapon was strangely unwieldy, and only struck a glancing

blow against the animal. It did pull the bear's attention though, and the animal turned to lumber toward its latest aggressor. As it hobbled its way toward him, it was clear that it had suffered damage, but it was still hale enough to be able to cause him serious injury. Placing his foot on the body of the chief, Richter attempted to pull his sword out of the body. It was stuck fast.

At his current state of low stamina, Richter could barely muster the strength to continue. Thankfully, an arrow from Sion struck the bear in its hamstring causing its leg to collapse. Richter sighed in relief. The bear had only been a few feet away when it dropped. Richter drew his battered knife and prepared for a last stand as it continued to crawl towards him. That was when he saw Sion lightly jump onto its back and swiftly run towards its neck. With a sharp jab, the sprite plunged his sword into the crook of the bear's neck and front leg. When the sword came out, there was a bright red spray of arterial blood. As its lifeblood spilled on the floor, the bear made a pitiful mewling noise and then finally collapsed.

Feeling exhausted, Sion looked up just in time to see a dark bolt of energy surging from the magician's staff. The only cover available was the bear's body. Sion dropped, placing the animal's body between him and the hobgoblin. There was no great blast of force like with the imbued arrows. Instead dark tendrils of magic crawled over the bear's body liquefying the

flesh and causing large gobbets of meat to slough off. Richter picked up his bow again, and shot an arrow at the mage. The results were less than impressive. The arrow bounced off an invisible barrier surrounding the black clad figure. The red light on the mage's staff began to throb faster and with more intense red color, looking like lava seen through basalt.

There could not be much time until the mage released whatever horrible spell he was building up to. Basic rule of thumb was that the longer a spell took to cast, the more powerful the result. Richter knew this would most likely be no different. With no time to lose, he nocked another arrow, giving his complete focus to imbuing it with his mana. After only a moment, it glowed golden. He released, and this time the arrow maintained its shine as it streaked towards the mage. It too struck an invisible barrier, but the extra force added caused the hobgoblin to stagger. Once the mage lost focus on the spell it was building, the light gathering at the staff's tip died. A second and possibly more important consequence was that the hobgoblin grabbed its head in both hands and shouted out in pain. The spell backlash from the interrupted casting must have been horrible based on the pitiful cries.

Nocking another arrow on the string, Richter once again focused his magic in the arrow, pouring more energy than before. For one, then two heartbeats, he held his bow at full extension as the golden glow brightened and black streamers seemed to cross over the golden shell, then he released.

The resultant boom deafened both him, and Sion, momentarily. The mage must have lost the ability to maintain its shield with the backlash. The arrow flew unimpeded and then detonated on target. The chest of the yellow-skinned mage caved inward and a red mist appeared in the air. The staff fell from his outstretched fingers as the robed body was flung backwards. Richter ran forward and plunged his dagger into the mage's yellow neck. He sawed back and forth, making a large hole. With a last expulsion of air, black blood sprayed over Richter's chest and the hobgoblin died.

The stench of blood, viscera and feces filled the room after the fierce fight. The two Companions stood and looked at their vanquished enemies. Having given it their all, they both stumbled towards the center of the room and the body of the slain goblin chief. Standing there above its body, they suddenly heard raised voices and angry cries coming from the tunnel. It could only mean one thing. A patrol had returned!

Richter looked to Sion, "Run. I don't have much stamina left to resist them, but I will be reborn if I die. You won't."

Grimly, Sion looked back, "The only known way to the surface is the direction they are coming from. Personally, I have no interest in dying alone in the dark at the claws of some subterranean monster. I will stand or fall with a friend." With that he stuck out his arm, which Richter clasped, each holding the other's wrist.

Sion released his grip and said, “Now move quickly. We have one chance. Goblins are cowards at heart, and will always bow to those of greater strength. Take the axe and remove the chief’s head.”

Not wasting time asking more questions, Richter picked up the axe. Again it seemed somehow to want to squirm out of his grasp, but his control was sufficient for this task. He struck down at the chief’s neck, severing it in two strokes. Seeing a clear gem by the chief’s body, he also picked that up and put it in his pouch.

“Now pick up the head, and stand by me with the axe at your side,” Sion instructed hurriedly.

And so the Companions stood, awaiting the goblins as the noise of their approach grew louder. The sprite was covered in gore and blood, a large tear in his cheek where the bear had scored a hit upon him. The chaos seed was favoring one leg. The wound from his skirmish with the scouts had reopened during this latest fight. Richter’s green armor was bespeckled with blood, both red and black. Despite his exhaustion, he stood tall and held the chief’s head by the hair. Drippings of blood made a soft *pat pat* on the floor as the head surrendered its remaining fluids. This was the sight that greeted the goblins that filed into the open space of the cavern.

Sion said in the common tongue, “This is our land. We will nourish it

with your blood as we did the blood of your comrades. The Land is always thirsty!”

Richter followed in the goblin’s own tongue, “I have taken the head and axe of your leader. I WILL take your souls as well! This was not enough,” and with that he tossed the chief’s head to lie at their feet. Then he shouted, “Kill them!”

Sion released an arrow, bright blue with magic at the one warrior in the group. The imbued shot impacted against the goblin’s face, killing it instantly. Where the sprite had mustered enough mana to imbue another shot Richter didn’t know, but he was absolutely thankful. In the same moment, Richter ran at the remaining scouts, screaming with the axe raised above his head. This was too much for the simple-minded goblins. The group had just walked over the bodies of dozens of their people, and it had only been the strong will of the warrior that had propelled them forward this far. Seeing a blood-drenched warrior running at them, they squealed and ran, dropping weapons behind them in their urgency to escape.

Richter chased them only to the edge of the chamber before stopping and lowering the axe. The damned unwieldy weapon seemed as much a risk to him as the enemy. As he watched the back of the last goblin turn the corner, a short gasp escaped him, followed by a loud grunt, and then quickly followed by laughter, the type of laughter that can only come from the mouth

of one who has passed through the shadow of death's domain and come out alive. He laughed to release all the tension he had accumulated through the dark day. He laughed in a vain attempt to balance out the horror of the slaughter he had committed. He laughed at the ridiculousness that he could still be alive. As the peals of manic laughter followed the goblin scouts, they ran all the harder. First, out of the cave, then away from the ruins and into the forest. They met up with other patrols, and the fear in their faces convinced those patrols to flee the forest as well. The goblins never fully rested until they had reached their swampy homeland. When they arrived, they passed along the horrible tale of the wild, laughing demon that had slain so many of their people.

CHAPTER 10 – Day 9 – Sanren 29, 15,368 ABG



As his mania left him, Richter slumped to the floor where he stood. He barely noticed Sion coming and sitting beside him. The two leaned back-to-back, supporting each other physically as they had come to do in all other arenas of their interaction. For a while, that was all they did. Neither could say how long had passed as they gazed at the bodies of the dead or simply gazed off into space, caught in their own musings.

Sitting there, Richter became aware of a slow blinking in the corner of his vision. He turned his head, but it remained stubbornly at the mid-right aspect of his gaze. Puzzled for a moment, he finally realized what it was. He relaxed his vision and saw an icon like an unrolled scroll. Focusing upon it for a moment, his vision filled with announcements.

TRING! TRING!

*You have reached **Levels 3 and 4!** Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice. Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!*

You have 12 Unused Characteristic Points and 50% of Unused Skill Growth to allocate. Now that you have progressed again, you must allocate your points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.

*You have completed the Quest: **Cleanse the Forest II**. Return to the hearth mother to collect your reward.*

*You have completed the Quest: **Cleanse the Forest III**. Return to the hearth mother to collect your reward.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 3 and 4 in **Archery**. +8% bonus to aim. +8% bonus to damage.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Swordsmanship**. ‘The pen may be mightier than the sword, but in another, much more real way, it isn’t.’
+3% Damage. +1% Attack Speed.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in **Light Armor**. +4% to Defense of all Light Armor.*

Congratulations! You have gained the Title: **Goblin Slayer.
+3% attack and defense bonus when fighting goblins.
Kill a total of 100 goblins to reach next level.
The blood you have spilled has changed you, and goblins will not like the look in your eye.
+1% Chance to coerce a goblin.**

You have proven yourself to be a friend of the forest. Not only have you

culled a goblin threat, but you have fulfilled the Quests set to you by the Hearth Mother. You and Sion's are not brothers in arms.

*Congratulations! You have gained **+12,500 Relationship Points** with **Sion**!*

*Your relationship with the **Sion** has improved from **Irritable (-250)** to*

***Admiring (+10,000)**. "I respect you. I am proud to have you in my life."*

*Total Relationship Points with the Sion: **+12,283***

All of these status windows were wonderful news to Richter. They must have been accumulating since the initial attack on the sickened goblins, but had been auto-minimized. Thank god for that. It could certainly have meant his death if a prompt blocked his view in the middle of a battle. What caused his eyes to widen and his mouth to run dry was the final prompt.

*Congratulations! You have cleansed a **Hidden Village**. As owner of the Heart Crystal and because there are no living descendants to the previous owners, you may now lay claim. Would you like to claim the village? Yes or No?*

Richter's fingers started tingling as if he was already counting his riches. And why not? It was in his name. Focusing on the "Yes" option, he read the next prompt.

*Congratulations! You have claimed your first village. You are now **Master of the Mist Village**. Your village is Level 1. As you increase the level of the*

village, more powers and resources will become available. This village is built upon a Place of Power. As you possess the prerequisite affinities, you are now bonded to this convergence of ley lines. You now have access to the magic and mana associated with this particular Place of Power. There are many secrets to any location of Power, and you must apply yourself to discover and master them. Good luck!

*Congratulations! You have won **+700 Fame Points** for founding a village on a Place of Power!*

*Total Fame Points: **+700***

Richter's mouth dropped open in shock. How had this happened? He had woken up naked in the forest barely a week ago. He had only just reached level four. Now he had his own village? And the fame was nothing to sneeze at. In the game there had been two basic types of reputations: global and local. Local reputation would increase or decrease based on your interaction with a specific group. Global reputation only really increased in response to fame points and he had just gotten 700!

It was true that 'global' as a term was a bit misleading. It did affect a broad amount of people or an entire region, but to affect another region there must be some connection between the two like a trade route. Reputation was not supposed to be a magic aura that just made people respect you more if

they could never have heard of you. Even though it didn't affect everyone in existence, global reputation was amazing nonetheless. It opened new quests, allowed for better treatment and better prices. It generally just made life more interesting.

Questions buzzed through Richter's mind, and first among them was:

"What's a place of power?" he asked musingly.

"A Place of Power is a nexus of the world's ley lines. It allows for a magnification of those particular powers. Sentient beings can tap into this," answered a deadpan voice. Somehow Richter could tell it put an emphasis on 'Place of Power' that he had not.

Before the second word was spoken, Sion was on his feet, arrow nocked and drawn. Richter was only a moment behind him, dagger pointing out to cover the other half of the room. They looked frantically about, but couldn't see anything.

"Who is that?" snapped Sion. Only silence answered his question.

"We both heard you. Who is there?" Richter asked, still looking about for a potential enemy.

"I am the interface for your village, Master."

"Where are you?" Richter asked, both exasperated and curious.

“I am present approximately one foot to the south of you, Master.”

“Why can’t I see you?”

“My last Master did not want me to be seen so I remain invisible.

Would you like to see me, Master?”

“Yes,” Richter replied, scanning the air directly in front of him.

“Show yourself.”

A gray sphere phased into view directly in front of his face. Its surface rippled like water, and it appeared lit from within, a steady and faint glow being cast from its center.

“Gah!” Richter exclaimed, jumping back. “Not so close!”

“Yes, Master,” the sphere said, moving back several feet. It continued to hover in the air.

“What are you?” Richter asked, fascinated by its appearance.

“I am a remnant. An echo of the personality of the first chamberlain of this village. He was a powerful user of magic, and served the first ruler of this Place of Power. Together, they built the Mist Village. At the end of his life, the chamberlain imparted intent to a fragment of his immortal soul. He tied it to this place to help guide future Masters.”

“How long ago was that?”

“My initial activation was 30,543 years before the removal of the gods from The Land.”

“That’s impossible,” Sion said, his tone clearly conveying his lack of trust of the floating orb. Of course, who the hell would trust a floating, talking orb? “What do you want?”

Again the orb floated in silence.

“Why do you only answer me?” Richter asked.

“You are the Master of the village, and I will only respond to your commands and questions. This was the policy of the last Master. He decreed it to be so in order to safeguard the village.”

“Well I command you to talk to and answer Sion.”

“As you wish. My goal is to aid my Master in any way that I can.”

Staring at the globe, Richter huffed, “What I really need are these bodies collected.”

“At the current level of the village, I can summon ten basic worker constructs immediately. Should I proceed?”

Not really expecting an answer to his complaining, Richter was pleasantly surprised, “What do you mean summon?”

“You are the Master of the Mist Village. Being built upon a Place of

Power, the village, and by extension you, have access to a certain amount of mana every day. As the level of the village increases, your access to mana will increase as well. Basic worker constructs cost one hundred mana to summon and each will last one day. You currently have access to a pool of one thousand mana. As Master, you have access to all of these options, though many more will not be available until the level of the village increases. You simply need to focus in order to access the interface.”

Richter relaxed his gaze in a now familiar way. Seeing a new icon in the shape of a small cluster of buildings, he mentally clicked upon it. Immediately, a crowded screen occupied his view. A series of pulldown menus were present,

Enchantments, Summoning, Population, Income, Mana Generation, Defenses, Global Relations ...

... and a host of others. Staggered by the amount of options, he simply focused upon “Summoning”. More pulldown options presented themselves, most grayed out and illegible. At the top was:

Summon Mist Worker. *Summons a level 1 mist worker. This creature is able to perform simple tasks of menial labor. The mist-like properties of your constructs halve all physical damage. This is a settlement spell. Can only be cast within the domain of your village. Cost: 100 mana. Duration: 24 hours.*

Range: 10 feet. Cast Time: 30 seconds. Cooldown: N/A.

“You can summon these creatures?” Richter asked.

“I can only do as you will, Master. If you instruct me to do so, I will implement your command.”

“Very well. Sion and I have to go back to the home of the Wood Sprites. It may take me several days to return. You have permission to summon these things daily. All of the dead bodies should be stripped of weapons, armor, and items. Take the bodies outside of the village and burn them.”

“The ley lines which run through this village are strong in Water, Air, Dark and Life. I have no access to Fire magic, however, Master. The workers can do everything you have instructed except light the bodies on fire.”

Richter looked at Sion, “I know you are eager to return home, but we need to take care of these bodies first. We could also use a rest. If I leave these bodies to fester, they will spread disease and pollute my new home.”

The sprite nodded, “Even though they were goblin filth, we do need to deal with the dead. As you have helped me to cleanse the forest, I will help you to cleanse your new home.”

Nodding, Richter turned back to the remnant, “What is your name?”

“I have none, Master.”

“What was the name of the mage that created you?”

“His name was Futen Windspeak.”

“Then I will call you Futen, if you like.”

“As you wish, Master,” Futen replied in the same deadpan voice. It might have been Richter’s imagination but it seemed that for just a moment, the grey sphere glowed a bit brighter.

“And enough of this Master business. That kind of thing could go to a man’s head. Call me Richter.”

“As you wish, Lord Richter.”

Opening his mouth to correct Futen, he closed it again, merely shaking his head slightly. Not worth it. Besides, ‘Lord Richter’ sounded pretty good.

“Summon the workers, Futen.”

Light grey mist rose from between the cracks in the stone floor. Initially, it was just a shapeless cloud one foot off the ground, but it soon began to pool in ten different spots in the chamber. The mist slowly rose, taking on vague humanoid shapes. Each figure grew distinct but remained faceless. They had no clothing and no sex organs. Under the skin of each figure were slow moving swirls. The end of each arm was a round, mist-filled sphere.

“How will they accomplish anything with those blobs for hands?”

“They can fit any form desired, Lord Richter. Please attend.” And, so saying, one worker raised its arm and the sphere became a hand, then a hammer, then a shovel head, before returning to a sphere.

Impressed by the versatility of the workers, Richter nodded. “Have them begin separating the bodies from their items. But put those two aside,” he said gesturing to the chief and hobgoblin. “Now, we need a safe place to rest.”

“This room will be safe, my lord. The workers, though not strong, will delay and alert any attack from above, and no creatures of ill intent from the depths can cross the Great Seal in the floor you are standing upon.”

Nodding wearily, Richter sat down against the most comfortable surface in the chamber, which happened to be the body of the dead bear, just not the liquefied part of course. Sion sat heavily beside him, the least graceful he had ever seen the sprite. Closing his eyes, Richter’s second to last thought was, ‘this is one messed up teddy bear,’ followed quickly by him verbalizing, “Wait! What creatures from what depths?”

CHAPTER 11 – Day 10 – Sanren 30, 15,368 ABG



A heavy, bladed axe plunged out of the dark as he fought a losing battle. Stabbing and swinging his sword, he fought as hard as he could. Again and again the axe gouged into his skin, eliciting blood and pain with each blow. He collapsed. Looking up at the goblin chief's face as it peered down at him, the monster raised its axe to strike one last time and sever his head...

Gasping, Richter stood swiftly, knife in hand, blinking away the terrors of his dream. After a while, he was able to slow his breathing, but his heart still hammered wildly. He may have done what was needed the night before, but he was still a twenty-four year old man from a modern world. Until last week he hadn't done anything more violent than punch the occasional frat boy that had gotten handsy with his female friends. As he became more aware of his surroundings, he realized Sion was also up with an arrow nocked, looking for the threat. Closing his eyes for a moment, he collected himself, before opening them again and looking at Sion. "There is no danger, my friend. None outside of my own nightmares."

Sion looked at him, relaxing the draw on the bow. "Yesterday was a

dark day, and I think better of you that it could not be so easily dismissed.”

With a pause of his own and then a small smile, he added, “My friend.”

Judging by the weariness he felt, they had only dozed for a few hours. The torch had gone out while they were sleeping, but some faint grey illumination filtered down from an unknown source in the ceiling. Richter heard the sounds of activity outside of the cave. There was no way he could go back to sleep right now so he turned to Sion and said, “Let’s see what we have.”

Richter walked over to the goblin chief’s body. He felt his gorge rise at the mix of smells: copper and nickel from the blood, sour stench from body reek and the nauseating reek from the feces that had escaped in death. Though he had ignored these in the heat of battle, faced with the harsh reality after a night’s rest, he was doubly glad for the workers who would clear the other bodies.

Searching the goblin, he first picked up the single-headed axe.

You have received:
Magic Iron War Axe

Attack: Damage 10-16
Durability: 26/30
Item Class: Uncommon
Quality: Above Average
Weight: 5.2 kg
Traits: ???
Requirements: Strength 13

Richter had not seen a requirement for weapons before. He could only assume that was because no other items he had acquired had requirements. Or maybe he had met the requirements, so they just hadn't been shown. Either way it did explain why the axe had seemed to resist him the night before.

The question marks were also new. He had to assume it was because the axe was magic and he didn't have the capability to identify it. Richter set it aside for now. Placing a foot on the beheaded body, he pulled his short sword free. That done, he stripped the rest of the goblin's armor examining each before setting them aside.

You have received: Wooden Buckler	Defense: +2 (Max defense +7) Type: Light armor Durability: 8/30 Item Class: Common. Quality: Average Weight: 2.3 kg.
You have received: Iron Mail Shirt	Defense: ++3 (Max defense +9). Type: Light armor Durability: 6/27 Item Class: Common Quality: Poor Weight: 8.1 kg.
You have received: Hardened Leather Pants	Defense: ++1 (Max defense +5) Type: Light armor Durability: 3/20 Item Class: Common Quality: Poor Weight: 2.4 kg

Traits: Dexterity +3

You have found: 28 Silver and 41 Copper

You have found: Garnet.	Gem Class: Common Gem Quality: ??? Durability: 51/74
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Confronted with yet another series of question marks, Richter stared at them. This time, he was rewarded with another prompt.

*You lack the skill in **Jeweling** to assess the quality of this gem. Learn Jeweling or obtain an assessment item to learn more.*

Well whatever its quality was, he was one gem richer. If nothing else, it would put food in his belly one day. Richter moved over to the hobgoblin. Sion had already stripped it of its belongings and had laid them upon the ground.

You have received: Novice Black Mage Robes	Defense: +1 (Max defense +4). (additional +7 vs magical attack) Type: Clothing Durability: 2/27 Item Class: Common. Quality: Above Average Weight: 2.9 kg.
You have received: Magic Staff	Attack: 5-6 Durability: 201/204

	Item Class: Rare Quality: Exquisite Weight: 3.2 kg.
You have received: Magic Bracelet	Durability: 10/11 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.3 kg

You have found: **28 Silver** and **41 Copper**

You have found: Unknown Potion x 2	Potion Class: Common Potion Level: Tincture Potion Strength: Weak Weight: 0.1 kg
You have found: Unknown Potion	Potion Class: Common Potion Level: Tincture Potion Strength: Weak Weight: 0.1 kg

Huh, it looked like the attack and defense of the items was affected by their durability. Richter guessed it made sense. Why would armor on its last legs still offer the same protection as when it wasn't beat all to hell? He was happy that he had found loot, but he still didn't know how useful it was.

"I'd be a lot more excited if I could identify any of this stuff," he verbalized.

"I can help with that," said Futen, materializing just to the side of

Richter's face.

“Arghh! I swear to god I'm going to put a bell on you if you keep surprising me like that.”

“It was not my intention to frighten you, Lord Richter.”

“I'm not frightened. Nobody said frightened. I'm just, startled. When you approach me in the future, though, become visible a couple of feet, let's say twenty feet, away. Understood?”

“Yes, Lord Richter. Would you like my help?”

He thought he heard a bit of attitude in the orb's flat voice, but then he assured himself that was impossible. “How can you help?”

“Normally to identify an item, you must use a spell or item. Alternately, you can take it to a magical college to have a magician uncover its true identity for you. I have the ability, however, to identify all but the most powerful of items. I can do this now if you wish.”

“Can you teach me?” Richter asked, eager to have this power.

“I am aware of your Limitless ability, my lord, but that can only be applied to skills. This is an ability, and I know of no way to teach abilities.”

Trusting that if there was a way to teach abilities, the remnant would have at least heard of it over the thousands of years of its existence, Richter

let the matter drop. Before asking Futen to use his ability, however, a thought occurred to him. “How do you know about my Limitless ability?”

“I possess a skill called Analyze. It allows me to know in-depth information about creatures.”

“So that is something I can learn. Do you have any other skills?”

“At this time, I am only aware of the one ability and one skill that I have told you about, Lord Richter. As I have only recently been awakened by the handling of the Heart Crystal, my memory is highly fragmented, however. It is entirely possible that as time goes on I will remember more. Also, if the village rises in level, then I may have access to further powers.”

Nodding, Richter said, “Let’s identify these items then. Afterwards you can teach me your skill.”

The light within Futen flared white, and suddenly the information was given to Richter in a series of prompts.

“How is it I suddenly have this information, when you are the one who has the skill?” Richter asked.

“You are the Master of this village. As long as we are close to one another, I can give you information without verbalizing. As the village grows, the distance we can interact over will grow as well.”

Impressed again at the versatility of this unasked-for helper, Richter

focused on the item information.

<p>You have received: Staff of Decay</p>	<p>Attack: 12-15 Durability: 201/204 Item Class: Rare Quality: Exquisite Weight: 3.2 kg. Traits: +4 Death damage. Has 17% chance to cause rapid decay upon target from direct strike or when channeling Death magic. Requirement: Alignment -2 or below.</p>
<p>You have received: Bracelet of Health</p>	<p>Durability: 10/11 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.3 kg Traits: Increase Maximum Health by +43</p>
<p>You have found: Mana Potion x 2</p>	<p>Durability: 6/6 Potion Class: Common Potion Level: Tincture Potion Strength: Weak Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Will restore 33 mana points over 26 seconds</p>
<p>You have found: Unknown Potion</p>	<p>Durability: 6/6 Potion Class: Common Potion Level: Tincture Potion Strength: Weak Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Will restore 49 health points over 22 seconds</p>
<p>You have received: Iron Axe of Strength</p>	<p>Attack: Damage 10-16 Durability: 26/30</p>

	Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Above Average Weight: 5.2 kg Traits: +1 to Strength Requirements: Strength 13
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He had found a *rare* item! Despite the fact that it seemed horrible, and was only for those with a negative alignment, there was no denying the power of the staff. Remembering the black sludge that the bear had turned into just from one Death spell, Richter shuddered. He couldn't help, but think of what would have happened if the staff's special ability had struck him.

Telling Sion the properties of each, the sprite spit on the floor upon hearing of the staff's true identity. "We should destroy this evil thing. For some reason I can't stand the sight of it."

"How," Richter asked. "Do I snap it over my knee? I somehow don't think that would work."

"Unfortunately, we most likely do not have the strength. Even if we did, it is not wise to tamper with the inner working of magical objects without the proper knowledge. Will you bring it back to the Hearth Tree so that the Mother can dispose of it?"

*You have been offered a Quest: **Destroy Evil's Weapon**. Sion has had an extreme reaction to the Staff of Decay. He hates it so much he can only think*

of destroying it. The sprite has requested your help carrying it back to the Hearth Tree so that Hisako can destroy it. Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?

Richter barely gave it a thought before nodding his assent. Though he and Sion had had a rocky start to say the least, the sprite was a comrade. He would trust his Companion's judgement. Focusing on what was in front of him, Richter looked at the axe, wondering about the strength requirement. He had already used it to sever the chief's head. It just didn't make logical sense to him that a simple item had a requirement. Picking it up, he took a practice swing, and felt immediately off balance. Taking a few more, he stumbled, disoriented. The last swing came dangerously close to cutting Sion. In the face of the glare he received from the diminutive man, he sheepishly placed the axe back down on the floor. Well, no point arguing with the facts. This axe was just not for him.

The sprite had shown no interest in loot, but Richter remembered the large amount of damage the thrown warrior's dagger had caused. Picking up the bracelet he handed it to Sion. The sprite initially looked like he would refuse, but Richter said "You are a great warrior my friend, but I seriously doubt this will be the last battle we are in. You have to grow stronger and survive. This will help." After a small protest, the sprite thanked him and slid the bracelet onto his arm up to his forearm. Richter couldn't be sure, but it looked like the jewelry shrunk slightly on Sion's arm. The sprite

immediately stood a bit taller, and it seemed he had somewhat greater tone and definition than a moment before.

Placing the money in his pouch, Richter picked up a second pouch that had belonged to the hobgoblin and slid the potions into it. Picking up the staff, he felt revulsion. It was like holding a writhing snake. He dropped it quickly. Cutting a length of cloth from the hobgoblin's clothes, he wrapped it around the staff, which greatly lessened the feeling of revulsion, but didn't banish it completely. Turning to Futen, he said, "Have the workers collect all of the other items and lay them aside. I will review them upon returning from the Hearth Tree."

"Is there anything else you would like to have done, my Lord?"

"I need to know what other resources there are available. I need to know what we can use to build the village."

"I will search the boundaries of the village and this level. Without your presence I can go no further than the boundaries of what you have laid claim to, my lord. You will need to explore, and vanquish, any enemies in the lower levels if you wish to know what other powers and riches may exist in the catacombs."

That had been the answer to Richter's question. Apparently, the Place of Power was home to monsters. Through the millennia, creatures of various

types had filled the underground levels. It was unclear if the Place of Power had created the monsters or if there were other entrances to the underground levels and they had moved in. What was clear was that the catacombs under his feet were not safe. Luckily, the mosaic in the chamber they were in, which Futen had named the “Great Seal,” stopped any monsters from venturing up from the catacombs below.

“Well then, the only other obvious point,” Richter said, “is that it’s a bit grandiose to call this pile of rocks a village. Can the worker’s build some houses, and clear away some rubble?”

“The workers are only the most basic of creatures, my Lord. They will follow any direction, but only exactly as it is given. They lack any real intelligence. Complex tasks, such as building a house, will be beyond them,” Futen replied.

“Very well, have them gather stones and sort them by size and type into different piles. Also have them chop down trees that have grown inside the boundaries of the village and stack them. Finally have them dig a trench around the area outside of the boundary of the village.”

Turning to leave, a last thought occurred to him. Pulling out the clear gem he had taken from the goblin chief’s body, “What is this?”

“That is the Heart Crystal, Lord Richter. It is the embodiment of your

dominion over these lands and the source of your connection to the village.”

“Does that mean if someone takes it from me suddenly they own the village?” Richter asked with some alarm in his voice.

“In its current state, yes, but you can bind yourself to the stone. By doing that, you and your bloodline will be tied to this village and the Powers it resides upon. You will also be granted the powers inherent in the crystal.”

“What powers?”

“Each Place of Power has certain characteristics depending on the composition of ley lines that creates it. As I stated before, this village sits upon a strong collection of Air, Water, Dark and Life ley lines. Binding to the Heart Crystal will tie your soul to the Place of Power. By fulfilling certain requirements, you will obtain mastery of each of those Powers in turn.”

Tied to his soul huh? That didn’t sound creepy or ominous at all. The other option was to lose this village to the first thief that took the Heart Stone, though. After a few more moments’ thought, Richter asked, “How do I do it?”

“Simply will it, my lord.”

Focusing upon the gem, he stared into its depths. He suddenly felt that he was being pulled into the stone, though he did not actually move. A slight tingle played across his skin. The sensation became focused upon the

inside of his left wrist. He realized with a start that the Heart Stone was gone.

“It is done,” the remnant said in its deadpan voice.

Looking at his wrist, Richter saw a silver grey circle on his inner wrist. It had a swirl of grey smoke within its boundaries that seemed to move slightly as he stared at it. After a moment the mark faded from view. He knew somehow he could summon it back if he desired.

THOOMMM!

*You have received a Mark: **Master of the Mist Village.***

Making their way out of the tunnel, dawn seemed to be just breaking. The workers had not been idle. There were three piles at the base of the hill leading from the cave, one of items, one of weapons and the other of armor.

Richter was about to ask Futen to call a worker over, but he remembered what was said about the village being an extension of himself. Focusing on the nearest worker, he willed it to come closer. It promptly left its task and came to stand before him. Smiling, he said, “Futen, how do I *Analyze* the worker?”

“You must gaze upon it. Focus until it becomes the only thing that exists. See past the external to the internal truth. This attention will draw its information to you.”

Focusing upon the worker, he stared intently at it. Richter looked at

the light grey swirls that slowly moved under its skin, the clear lines of its arms, head, torso and legs. He gazed at its shapeless face and suddenly he just knew!

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Analyze**. Cost 5 mana. You will be able to know information about other creatures simply by looking at them. The greater the difference in level between you and the target, the less effective your skill may be.*

Richter wasted no time using his new skill.

Mist Worker, Lvl 1. Health: 50/50, Mana 0/0, Stamina 400/400. This magic construct can change the lines of its body to form the right tool for any menial task. The mist-like properties of this construct halve any physical damage received.

“I was able to do it Futen, but the information is pretty basic.”

“Yes my Lord. You will have to increase the level of the skill to obtain more information.”

Pleased nonetheless, Richter let the worker return to its duties.

The bodies had been dragged outside of the boundaries and placed within a pit the workers had dug. Grabbing a few water skins from the pile of items, he removed the stopper from each, pouring out a small amount of the

contents. The first appeared to be water as expected. The second, he quickly cast aside deciding not to ponder what the vile contents could be. The third, however, appeared to be oil. Moving over to the pit, he poured the contents over the bodies. Striking flint, Sion lit one of the leftover torches from the goblin camp, and then cast it into the pit. After a short time, the flames were licking eagerly at the naked green forms. Giving one last order, Richter said, "Once the bodies are consumed, fill the pit with dirt again. I don't want to be reminded of these creatures."

"Is there anything else I can do, my lord?" Futen asked in its deadpan voice.

"Don't hesitate to advise me if you have something useful to say. Do your best to take care of the village and me. I want to be made aware of any major decisions, but in my absence do your best to protect and grow the village."

"It will be done, my lord," the remnant answered.

Richter and Sion began their trip back to the Hearth Tree.

CHAPTER 12 – Day 13 – Shibon 1, 15,368 ABG



The journey back to the home of the sprites passed without incident. After several days of moving through the forest they were greeted by the sight of the golden grasses of the glade. The Hearth Tree loomed in front of them. As before, the Hearth Mother seemed to know they were approaching and was waiting for them at the edge of the grass.

She smiled at him with a look of contentment and peace.

Richter smiled back, and nodded his head slightly, “I have finished my quests. We traced the sickened animals to a goblin camp. There was a hobgoblin necromancer who was responsible for poisoning the forest and its inhabitants. Somehow, this poisoning also gave it control over the wildlife. I do not know how, but the important thing is that it is dead. It will poison the forest no longer. The danger has passed.”

“I greatly appreciate all of your efforts, and for bringing our warrior home safely. In addition to your reward, I will give you a word of caution. Though those creatures were evil, it does not make them things. Robbing other creatures of their identity or gender may ultimately rob you of your

goodness.”

Her warning done, Hisako beckoned to some of the sprites behind her. Richter checked the prompts that had just appeared.

*You have received 1,000 experience for **Cleanse the Forest I**.*

*You have received 3,000 experience for **Cleanse the Forest II**.*

*You have received 6,000 experience for **Cleanse the Forest III**.*

TRING! TRING!

You have reached Levels 5 and 6! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice. Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

*You have **12 Unused Characteristic Points** and **100% of Unused Skill Growth** to allocate. Now that you have progressed again, you must allocate your points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.*

By fulfilling the quests given by the Hearth Mother, your relationship with all sprites of the Hearth Tree has improved. As the master of a Village, this affects the relationship between your two settlements as well.

*Congratulations! You have gained **+1,000 Relationship Points** with every sprite of the Hearth Tree!*

*Congratulations! The Mist Village has gained **+1,000 Relationship Points** with the Hearth Tree!*

*The relationship of the Mist Village and the Hearth Tree has improved from **Neutral (0)** to **Friendly (+1000)**. “We look forward to our trading opportunities!”*

“We made these while you were gone. I had a feeling that you would earn them,” she said with another smile. Two sprites came forward, one holding a bow, the other holding a helmet and gloves. The bow was a beautiful chestnut recurve. The handle looked like deer hide, and the ends of the bow curved forward in a classic example of recurve design. Delicate carvings of leaves adorned both ends of the bow, almost alive in their realistic rendering. The gloves were made of the same pliable, yet tough, green material as the armor he already had. Silently, Richter reached out and took the weapon and armor.

You have received: Spritely Helm	Defense: +5 Type: Light armor Durability: 30/30 Item Class: Uncommon. Quality: Well Crafted. Weight: 2.1 kg. Traits: Max vision distance increased by 25%
You have received: Gauntlets of the Wood Sprite	Defense: +4 Type: Light armor

Durability: 25/25
Item Class: Uncommon.
Quality: Well Crafted.
Weight: 1.3 kg.
Traits: Ranged accuracy increased by 25%

Congratulations! You have obtained an entire set of matched armor: **Sprite Armor**. Defense given by each piece increased by 25%. Special Bonus: 50% less noise made while moving through forests.

You have received: **Recurve bow of the Wood Sprite**. Damage 14-19. Durability 35/35. Item Class: Scarce. Quality: Superb. Weight: 3.8 kg. Traits: + 8 Dexterity. + 5% accuracy. Provides the subskill: **Focus**.

*Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: **Focus**. By expending stamina, you can zoom in on your target making shots easier. This is a subskill of Archery.*

Taking a firm grip on the bow, he sighted upon a branch at the edge of a clearing, and brought it in line with his imaginary crosshairs. He invoked his new skill, and the branch zoomed in focus. He could now easily make out small details and see the veins in each leaf. Richter guessed that what he was

seeing was magnified by 100%. As he held the increased view, he became aware of his stamina bar decreasing. At its current rate, he would completely exhaust his stamina in less than thirty seconds. As the bar got closer to empty, he felt the dizziness and exhaustion that he had felt at the end of the fight with the goblin chief. Releasing *Focus*, the bar began to replenish slowly. After a few moments, the feeling of disorientation began to abate. A wonderful new subskill, but possibly dangerous if overused in the heat of battle.

Bowing his head, Richter said, “These are gifts beyond measure. How can I repay you?”

“We would only provide a full set of our armor to a true friend of the Hearth Tree. You are worthy and you have aided the Forest. This is the purpose of our clan; to serve its will and interests. Speak no more of it,” she said with a soft smile. “There is something else we need to discuss. You may have noticed our Hearth Tree is larger than the surrounding forest.”

Smiling wryly, Richter said, “Yeah, it’s a little hard to miss.” The tree was the size of a small high-rise.

“I am the Master of this Place of Power,” Hisako said, “and as such I can recognize other Masters. My Powers are of Life, Earth and Light.” Holding up her left wrist, a small circle appeared. While Richter’s was silver

and filled with mist that slowly swirled, the Hearth Mother's was deep green with the figure of a tree. The branches seemed to wave in an unseen wind, the leaves gently shifting. Somehow feeling it was the right thing to do, he held up his left wrist, and his Mark appeared as well.

“Thank you for showing me trust,” she said with a smile. “Your Mark will be hidden from most, but any Master of a Place of Power will be able to identify you if they get close enough. There is a glow in the center of the eyes, you can see mine if you look. Be careful of this. Being a Master means that you have access to power. Power that others will take if they can. You are now a player in the great game, but you are a target as well. Invest in the growth of both your village and your own power. Create a meaningful community, and be careful who and what you allow in. The decisions of today can bear fruit centuries in the future.”

Smiling at her motherly tone, he thanked her for her advice. “I need people for my village, and I need to sell the skins and other treasure that I have found. I plan on traveling into the Kingdom of Yves. Hopefully there I can find a buyer for my goods and settlers who are willing to come with me for a fresh start.”

“Hmmm, that is the closest human kingdom, and you can find almost anything there. Tread lightly when you go. I do not know what humans are like in your world, but here, while they can be generous and kind, they are

often petty, greedy and cruel. I would not easily tell anyone that you are a Master, or where your village is located. And as I said, Masters can recognize each other. You should stay away from the palace or other halls of influence.”

“Is every settlement built on a Place of Power?” Richter asked.

“No, but most settlements that have grown to prominence did so because of the strength of their Powers. I have not been into the human lands for more than a century. The capital city of Yves is called Law. It is built upon a confluence of Fire, Water, Earth and Air. Most Places of Power that are taken over by human settlements have a balance of their forces. It may be because they have an equal likelihood to serve Good or Evil.”

“Huh, so be careful, everywhere I go is dangerous, and I’m now a cosmic target. That’s basically it, right?” Richter asked.

The Hearth Mother walked closer and motioned for Richter to kneel down. He went on a knee and looked her in the eye. That was when she slapped him in the side of his head. He really needed to start being careful of letting small beings within striking distance.

“Don’t complain. It could always be worse, and nobody likes a crying baby. Not even the Hearth Mother.” Hisako said.

Sion chuckled behind him, and said, not quite under his breath,

“Rookie.”

Flaring his nostrils, Richter exhaled a deep breath, then gave a chuckle himself. “Yes, ma’am.”

Standing back up, he turned to Sion. “Well, my friend, I will miss your company.”

The sprite smiled at him, “No, you won’t. I’m coming with you.”

With a slightly confused half-smile on his face, Richter asked, “Are you sure?”

In a sweeping gesture that started at his head and moved down towards his feet, Sion replied, “A big man like me belongs in the big city.” And the grin on his face grew wider.

Hisako nodded in approval. “In the distant past, the people of the Mist Village and wood sprites of the Hearth Tree have been friends, even allies. I hope that we can be again.”

Richter replied, “I hope so too. I was concerned that you might not welcome me as a friend anymore. My village is on a ley line of Dark magic.”

“It is true that many evil creatures are drawn to Dark or Death magic, but that does not make those powers inherently evil. Night is just as natural as day, and death will be always be a part of life. Your actions will determine the character of your village, and you have earned my trust,” Hisako said.

“Now is there anything else we can do to aid your journey?”

Humbled by her faith in him, he smiled, “I could use a way to transport goods to and from the city.”

“We can help with this, though it will take the rest of the day. Is there anything else,” she asked again.

Sion stepped forward, “We have found an artifact of evil, Mother. I was hoping that you knew how to destroy it.” Richter unwrapped the staff, showing it to Hisako.

For the first time, Richter saw a look of true anger on her face. “Drop that thing,” she commanded.

Richter quickly complied, releasing it to tumble out of its wrappings. It fell, but did not strike the ground. The golden grasses wrapped around the staff. The grass wound so tightly that Richter could hear squeaking from the pressure. Some of the gold color leached from the grasses as they tried to crush the black wood. Brighter flashes of red color could be seen coming from the staff, almost as if it tried to free itself from the golden vise. A look of serious concentration was on Hisako’s face. With a tightening of her jaw, she glared at the staff. Suddenly there was a loud rumbling sound. A small tear opened in the ground, widening to five feet long and one foot wide. The grass bent, lowering the staff into the ground as the red pulses came faster

and faster. The rent in the earth closed over the staff and all was quiet for a moment before a boom came from beneath them, more felt than heard.

Richter looked uneasily over the seemingly benign sea of golden grass that he now knew was a deadly prehensile defense. Hisako exhaled a breath of relief. The Hearth Mother looked at Sion with tears in her eyes, “We have saved one.”

A prompt appeared in Richter’s vision.

*You have completed the Quest: **Destroy Evil’s Weapon**. A Royal Pixie Chrysalis was recovered! This may have long reaching consequences in the future!*

*Reward: **1,000 XP**.*

“It is done,” Hisako continued. “That, *thing*, was a greater evil than you know. I can see why you instinctively felt it needed to be destroyed, my son. It was not just a tool of evil. It was a corruption of good.” Sion looked at her in confusion. She wiped a single tear from her eye and said, “At the core of the staff was a royal pixie chrysalis.”

Sion inhaled in shock. “Can it be true? Can you save it?”

“I don’t understand. What’s happening,” asked Richter.

“Sion may have told you that goblins were our racial enemies. As such, neither of our two races can normally abide the other, and aggressive

qualities are increased on both sides. That is partly because goblins usually possess a negative alignment, and wood sprites are normally positively aligned.”

“Pixies are the opposite side of the coin. They are our natural allies and bring a completion to our magic. It is said that every sprite born has half of a destiny, and each pixie born has the other half. Long ago, before I was born, there was a sickness that only affected pixies. Despite the combined efforts of the races of Good, pixies were erased from the face of The Land. That was what I have always thought, but we were wrong.” Her face radiated pure joy. “Finding this chrysalis is like finding the other half of our soul. Will you please relinquish the pixie into our care? We can channel our Life magic into it and hopefully revive at least one of the species.” She looked at him with a pleading gaze.

“Uhhhh, yeah,” Richter said, taken aback by the depth of emotion in Hisako’s voice. He then immediately felt like a moron for not giving a better answer than ‘Uhhhh, yeah’ in such a pivotal moment.

*Your relationship has improved with Wood Sprites from **Friendly** to **Trusted**.*

*The relationship of the Mist Village has improved with wood sprites of the Hearth Tree from **Friendly** to **Trusted**.*

Hisako’s face shone like the sun. Her anger at seeing the staff had

been replaced by pure joy. “Thank you for this precious gift. Rest with us, then start on your journey in the morning.” Their rations had run out the night before, so Richter welcomed a good meal. The Hearth Mother turned and walked through the golden grass. As Richter, Sion and other sprites followed her, he thought hopeful thoughts for the morrow.

CHAPTER 13 – Day 14 – Shibon 2, 15,368 ABG



The sky began to lighten with colors of peach and amber. Sion and Richter once again stood at the boundaries of the meadow containing the Hearth Tree. Several dozen sprites stood with Hisako to see the two Companions off.

“Once you return to your village, make your way due west,” Hisako said. “After several weeks of travel, you should reach the boundary of the forest. There, you will find a road. The other travelers you meet can direct you to the city of Law. Be careful. There are many dangers in the forest. We are on the northern side and there shouldn’t be many organized tribes between here and Yves, but sometimes the southern tribes send hunting parties up. They are not as kind as we are.” Turning to Sion, Hisako placed a cupped hand to his face. “Come back to us safely, my son.”

Closing his eyes, he bowed his head, “Yes, mother.”

Led by two sprites, a pair of ponies with saddle bags were brought to them. Checking the bags, Richer saw that they were filled with foodstuffs and other useful tools, including more Sprite Arrows of Nature. It was a welcome

sight because they had only been able to recover a few after the fight with the goblins. Thanking Hisako a final time, they mounted the ponies and moved off into the forest. Riding in silence for the first ten minutes, Richter then looked to Sion, asking, “So you’re a prince, huh?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Sion replied curtly without turning his head.

Chuckling under his breath, Richter replied, “Whatever you say, your highness,” and rode on next to his friend.

It took three days to get back to the village. Each night they scouted for herbs, and Sion began to teach him the rudiments of potion making. The tools that Sion used were too small to be of practical use for Richter, but he did still obtain the Alchemy skill by assisting the sprite. Unfortunately, knowledge alone was not enough to increase his skill level and he did not advance further than level one with 0% towards the next level.

The peace of the ride also let him focus upon an area he had been ignoring, his point allocation. He did not want everything randomly allocated and it had been almost a week since he had reached level four. Based upon the battles he had fought so far, he would not last long in a stand-up fight. Each kill he had made had been greatly aided by either surprise or poison weakening his enemies. The large amount of damage that the bear caused

with just a glancing blow worried him. It was clear that he needed more health. At the same time however, the power of both his Imbue Arrow and Focus skills meant his mana and stamina also needed to be higher. In the past, it had always served his playing style better to be well rounded anyway. Richter decided to examine each characteristic carefully.

Strength – Improves damage with melee weapons or thrown weapons. Each point increases carrying capacity by 10 kg. Affects anything that requires brawn, i.e. climbing, wrestling, and intimidation. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Agility – Improves accuracy with ranged or thrown weapons. Determines movement speed. Determines dodge. Determines balance. Affects ability to move without being detected. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Dexterity – Determines attack speed. Improves damage with ranged weapons. Improves reflexes. Improves accuracy of melee weapons. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Constitution – Determines Health. Each point increases Health by 10 points. Affects resistance to poison, illness, extreme temp, etc. Affects stamina regeneration. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Endurance – Determines stamina. Each point increases Stamina by 10 points. Affects ability to perform physical exertions at peak efficiency e.g.

holding one's breath. Affects ability to ignore certain ill effects e.g. disease, starvation, dehydration, etc. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Intelligence – *Determines mana. Each point increases Mana by 10 points. Affects resistance to mental attacks. Affects effectiveness of certain skills. Reasoning improved. Increasing will provide small improvement of base intellect. Other unknown effects to be discovered.*

Wisdom – *Determines mana regeneration. Affects magical resistance. Determines perception. Increasing will provide small improvement of mental fortitude. Other unknown effects to be discovered.*

Charisma – *Determines the likelihood others will like you or want to interact with you. A higher score may open certain quests that would otherwise be locked. Other unknown effects to be discovered.*

Luck – *It will affect you in a million different ways... or not. But as the man said, "I'd rather be lucky than ugly."*

Each description was helpful save the last. Of course every game he had ever played had a crappy description for Luck.

He had twenty-four points to invest. He could definitely see the bonus from being a chaos seed coming in handy. He would theoretically be 50% more powerful than other humans at an analogous level. He decided to invest half of his points equally into Constitution, Endurance and

Intelligence, raising his Health, Mana and Stamina by forty points each.

As his current capabilities seemed based on ranged attacks and speed, at least for now, he decided to forgo strength. Agility had already been increased. Though it pained him to put points in a “soft” area like Charisma, it was clear he could not look at his current situation as if he was playing a simple RPG. This was his life now. His upcoming interaction with a whole city meant that interpersonal interactions were going to be important. Also the advice of the Hearth Mother to make a community was something he took seriously. The comedy of having a four-foot tall older woman dictating his life wasn’t anything new, his own mother was five feet of feisty fury.

He invested four points in luck, because... hey, what self-respecting southerner couldn’t win a hand of Texas Hold’em. At that thought, he made a mental note to invent Texas Hold’em. He was sure he could make a fortune cleaning out the medieval rubes that seemed to live around here. He put two points into Dexterity to get a bit more attack damage out of his bow, and hating every moment of the decision, he invested six points in Charisma. Choosing ‘Yes’ on the final ‘Are you sure’ prompt, he felt like he had just sacrificed six children.

In addition to the points from his leveling, his exertions during his quest to cleanse the forest had given him +2 Endurance, +1 Strength, and +3 Dexterity. Looking at his status page, he decided that, despite his low level,

he liked how he was rounding out.

Name: Richter

Age: 24

Level: 6, 15%

Health: 140 **Mana:** 140 **Stamina:** 160

Strength: 11

Agility: 17

Dexterity: 26 (*base: 15 + items: 11*)

Constitution: 14

Endurance: 16

Intelligence: 14

Wisdom: 10

Charisma: 16

Luck: 14

Abilities:

Limitless

Gift of Tongues

Skills:

Herb Lore Lvl 2; 81% to next level, 100% affinity

Alchemy Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity

Analyze Lvl 1; 5% to next level, 100% affinity

Stealth Lvl 3; 44% to next level, 100% affinity

Archery Lvl 4; 23% to next level, 100% affinity

Imbue Arrow Lvl 1; 43% to next level, 100% affinity

Focus Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity

Swordsmanship Lvl 1; 28% to next level, 100% affinity

Small Blades Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity

Light Armor Lvl 2; 21% to next level, 100% affinity

Marks:

Master of the Mist Village

Resistances:

Mental 5%

Spiritual 5%

Race: Human (Chaos Seed)

Reputation: Lvl 1 "Who are you again?"

Alignment: Neutral

Languages: Common, Sprite

Seeing the ‘100% affinity’ after each skill seemed superfluous in light of his Limitless ability. With a bit of focus, he found he could change his settings so that his affinities weren’t listed. He smiled when he looked again and saw that his status page was much more streamlined. The last thing he had to decide was where to put the proficiencies. He had a total of 100% to increase any skill, in groupings of 25%. His strongest asset was now Imbue Arrow making it an easy decision. He placed all 100% into the skill and was rewarded with a prompt.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in **Imbue Arrow**. +10% damage. +10% speed of mana flow.*

One curious thing was that both his Focus and Imbue Arrow skills were offset on his status page. He had seen the same thing when examining Sion’s status. Now that he was thinking about it, Richter remembered that both had been called ‘subskills.’ Asking the sprite about it, the explanation given was fairly simple. Subskills were dependent on another main skill. As such, increasing the subskill would increase the main skill slightly, but the subskill could never be of a higher level than the main skill. Richter nodded in understanding, and they rode on.

Midday on the third day after leaving the Hearth Tree, they arrived

back at the Mist Village. The trip was much faster now that they knew exactly where they were going. As they came upon the ruins he was now the Master of, Richter chuckled silently and thought to himself, could my life BE any more manga? He was pleasantly surprised, however, as he looked out over the progress that had been made. A trench lined the outside of the ruined wall, six feet wide and six feet deep. The dirt from the trench had been lined up and packed on top of the stone remnants creating a four-foot earthen wall. Hard packed dirt led across the trench in one area, leading to a break in the crumpled wall. Outside the trench, there were stacks of chopped-down trees with the branches cut off and piled to the side. Three piles of stone were also present, arranged by size, presumably the loose rocks from inside the wall. All of the bodies had, of course, been removed, but even the stone had been scrubbed clean of some of the black blood stains. Only a trace of the previous foul odor remained. What was before him now was a plateau of grass pockmarked with freshly turned earth where the trees had been cut down and then the stumps removed. True to his instructions, Futen appeared several feet away, and glided to a stop in front of him.

“Welcome back, my lord.”

Richter smiled, “You’ve done well, Futen. How is our village?”

“We have had some exciting developments in the last week, my lord,” the remnant said. The content of his message contrasted sharply with

his emotionless tone. Richter took Hisako's advice to heart and decided to personify the floating orb as 'he' rather than 'it'. "Though we cannot erect external buildings, we have collected raw resources as you can see. I have also explored the floor where you claimed Mastery of the village. I have found several useful rooms. If you will come with me, sir."

Futen began gliding away at the speed of a normal walk. Climbing the hill to the cave entrance, Richter and Sion followed it inside. Grey lights cast a gentle glow over the tunnel. Periodically placed along the top of the hallway, globes of glowing mist could be seen.

"Where did these come from?" Richter asked.

"They are one of the settlement spells open to you, my lord. The mana requirement for the mist lights is negligible. Once cast, they last for a year at a time, so I took the liberty."

The tunnel opened into the chamber of his grand fight. The ceiling arched above all of their heads, this time illuminated by mist globes which clearly showed vaulted ceilings. The blood had been cleaned from the floors along with much of the grime. A massive mosaic could now be seen in the floor consisting of four separate spirals that met in the middle. Each spiral was a different color. One spiral was gold and the opposing spiral black. The other two were blue and clear respectively. The center of the mosaic was a

dark gray diamond. Opposite from where they entered the room, a staircase could be seen leading downward. The other entrances were also well lit.

“On this floor is a meeting hall, larder, storage room, armory, barracks and treasury, and several other empty rooms. The stairway leads to the first floor of the catacombs.”

Richter had been walking around the mosaic examining it. He nodded along as Futen spoke, but looked up sharply at the last. Treasury, did you say? Realizing he had not asked aloud, most likely because his mouth had started watering, he tried again.

“Treasury, did you say?”

“Yes, my lord, I was going to show you that...”

“Let’s go now,” Richter said, cutting the remnant off.

The remnant changed direction, gliding to a hallway on the left. At the end of the hallway was a solid door. It appeared to be made of a steel with dusky black swirls set in the metal. Richter could see a clear circle of glass inlaid at head height.

“What is it made of?” Richter asked running his hand along the metal.

“This is titan steel. Not harder and heavier than mithril, but still able to withstand a massive amount of damage.”

“Well, open it, Futen.”

“I cannot, my lord.”

“You said you had exciting news,” Richter said in confusion.

“Yes, my lord. The news is that I had found the treasury.”

Richter glared at the floating grey orb. The orb just floated, impervious to his stare.

“It would be a lot more exciting if you could open the door.”

“That is why I was going to leave this door until the tour,” Futen said.

Fighting the urge to create a neck for the orb so he could strangle it, Richter said, “Are you telling me that I have a treasury but I can’t get into it?”

“No, my lord.”

Richter glared at the orb again, waiting for it to say more. He stared at it until he realized the futility of having a staring contest with an eyeless orb. Meanwhile Sion had fallen to the floor, rolling on his back laughing. Transferring his stare to the sprite, it seemed to have about as much effect as it had on the orb.

“Then how do I get in?” His voice was nearly a shout.

“Simply hold your Mark in front of the clear circle on the door, my lord.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that at first?”

“I was going to cover it during the tour, my lord.”

One eye starting to twitch, Richter said, “If I ever find out that you’re messing with me, I will find a way to turn you pink.”

“Of course, my lord,” the remnant replied in his *almost* deadpan voice.

Walking up to the door, Richter raised his left arm and held his Mark up to the glass circle. A soft voice spoke inside of his mind, **Do you wish the door to open, Master?**

Yes, he thought back.

As you wish.

A sound came from behind the door like the withdrawing of bolts. It then swung open, and Richter was greeted by the sight of an octagonal room with shelves lining the walls. Empty shelves. Sighing heavily, he swallowed the greedy lump in his throat and moved into the room. As he stepped in, he realized that the shelves were not completely empty. Three small items were carefully positioned against the right side of the room, near the door. He hadn’t been able to see them until he was inside the room. Moving to the first

item, he opened it and a mix of copper, silver and gold coins greeted his gaze. Even though the chest was only the size of a loaf of bread, there were hundreds of coins inside. There had to be dozens of gold coins present which were worth a hundred dollars each by themselves. Doing a little internal jig, he moved to the second chest. It held a scattering of gems, which might be worth more than even the coins. Yup! His mouth was *definitely* watering now. Almost unable to tear his eyes from the second chest he moved on. The third item was a book. Picking it up, he attempted to read it, but the words swam in his vision. Examining the prompt associated with it he saw why he was having trouble.

You have found:
Magic Book.

Durability: 10/11
Item Class: Uncommon
Quality: Well Crafted
Weight: 0.4 kg.

Groaning in frustration, Richter said, “Futen, identify this.”

The orb flared, and Richter looked again.

You have found:
Book of Weak Charm

Durability: 10/11
Item Class: Uncommon
Quality: Well Crafted
Weight: 0.4 kg.
Spell School: Life
Traits: You can convince up to a level 8 humanoid target that they are your friend. In battle, they will

fight for you. Casting this upon a creature lowers their regard for you after the spell wears off.

Requirements: Intelligence 16,
Charisma 18

Definitely a useful spell. Plenty of melee battles in games that Richter had played had been won by taking control of enemy units and making them fight each other. Turn your enemy's strengths against them! He was pretty sure he had heard that in a Tarantino movie. It was a shame that he hadn't met the requirements yet. It was certainly a priority though. It also showed that Charisma was more versatile than he had initially thought.

Despite the somewhat threadbare status of the treasury, this was certainly a start. Putting the book in his pack, he then picked up both chests, carrying them under his arms. Leaving the treasury, he walked back to the center of the chamber. As he walked away from the octagonal room, he heard the door closing with a solid boom and the locks snapping back into place. Laying both chests down in the central chamber, Richter asked Futen, "What else should I know?"

"The armory is this way, my Lord."

Following the orb, Richter and Sion made their way into another hallway. Again he was greeted by a door, though this door was only wood

banded with iron. It also possessed a clear circle at head height. Raising his wrist he thought, 'Open.' No voice chimed inside of his head this time, though his intent was apparently clear as the door swung open. Moving into the room, lines of swords, axes and bows sat under massive amounts of cobwebs. Definitely the armory that time had forgotten. He closed the door and walked back.

“I am sure there are many things to explore, but is there anything crucial that I need to know?”

“I have followed your instructions, my lord. I have had the workers gathering raw materials and working on basic physical defenses. I would advise caution however, considering that you have not instituted any of the magical defenses.”

Richter looked blankly at the orb, wanting clarification, until realizing that, yet again, an eyeless orb might not be so good at picking up facial expressions.

“What defenses?” he asked.

“You have access to the village interface, my lord. You simply need to focus upon the options which are available.”

Richter selected the icon for his village. A sprawling list of pull down menus filled Richter's vision. Realizing how long this might take, he closed

the menu in a fit of annoyance. “Can I get a chair?”

A short time later, both he and Sion were settled into the barracks. Really just a line of stone beds in a long room. There were no creature comforts, but it would serve. The ponies were tacked outside where they could graze. Sion settled down for the night, while Richter laid back and browsed through the interface. He first looked into Defenses. It simply showed the status of the current physical defenses. Next he checked Enchantments. This showed a host of options. Most were greyed out, but two at the top were available: Concealing Mist and Confusing Mist.

Concealing Mist: Cost 400 mana. Upkeep 200 mana per day. Generates a thick mist field at the borders of the village which extends to the boundaries of your domain. You may grant immunity to this effect to those of your choosing. Attacking or taking hostile action against a creature will negate the effects for a short period.

Confusing Mist: Cost 800 mana. Upkeep 400 mana per day. Generates a thick mist field which extends to the boundaries of your domain. Causes disorientation that will lead affected creatures in random directions. You may grant immunity to this effect to beings of your choosing. Attacking or taking hostile action against a creature will negate the effects for a short period.

The enchantments were passive, but he could easily see the power of

them.

“What does it mean by the boundaries of the domain, Futen?” Richter asked.

“You are Master of more than just the village, my lord. Your power also extends ten miles in all directions. The boundaries will increase as you increase the village level.”

“You have mentioned increasing the village level several times. Just how do we do it?”

“There are multiple requirements my Lord. You can see them on your interface.”

Letting his eyes unfocus again, he began searching. Ultimately, he found the tab, “Settlement Level.”

Level 1: Total Mana: 1000. Mana regenerates at 41.67 (Total mana/24) per hour. Boundary of surrounding lands: 10 miles from Great Seal.

Requirements for level up: Increase population to at least 100. Build ten freestanding buildings. Master three levels of the catacombs. Finish four quests of the Mist Village.

“Where do I get quests from?”

“I am tied to this Place of Power, my Lord,” Futen said. “As such I can read the needs of this land. There is one quest that is available now. As

time goes on I will tell you of other needs of the village. You may also find information on quests in your Master's interface."

*You have been offered a Quest: **Unlock your Power I**. Your village will increase your power, but you must care for it in turn. Currently there is a local dungeon that needs to be cleared out. Reward: Unlock one of the Powers. Yes or No?*

As if there was any question. If Richter was right, this quest would increase his magic immensely. Choosing 'Yes,' he looked at Futen. "Any idea how I can find it?"

"I can move freely within the boundaries of the village. I will guide you."

"How about it?" he asked Sion. "Ready to kick some monster butt?"

"That's what I do," his friend answered with a grin.

"In the morning then," Richter responded with a grin of his own.

CHAPTER 14 – Day 18 – Shibon 6, 15,368 ABG



Awakening early, Richter told Futen not to summon the workers today. This was somewhat of a sacrifice, though a short lived one. Futen had continued his report until Richter had fallen asleep. One of the items discussed was that an iron mine had been found, which Richter was happy to hear. Once he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, Richter told Futen that he agreed that defenses should be put in place to protect the village. Summoning the workers could wait until an enchantment was cast. They walked outside and stood near the earthwork wall. Richter opened his interface. Prior to casting the spell however, a thought occurred to him.

“The purpose of the *Concealing Mist* and *Confusing Mist* spells are to hide the village. If there is a well-defined border of magical mist, though, won’t people be able to figure out the location of the village by just mapping the boundaries?” Richter asked the remnant.

“The mist slowly builds along the boundaries of our territory, my Lord. Have you ever been able to mark exactly when and where mist starts? I assure you the enchantment is quite effective, but it is not foolproof. Also, to

map the boundaries of the mist would mean walking for more than sixty miles. It is a possibility that a master mage, or someone with a strong item, could dispel the enchantment, at least temporarily. Or a being with high magical resistance might be able to ignore its effects. So while I advise that you not put all of your faith in the enchantment, my Lord, I assure you that it is very useful,” Futen replied.

Nodding assent, Richter reactivated the interface, bringing up the enchantments available. He had thought about it last night, and decided the longer his village remained secret, the better. Even though using four hundred mana was a steep upkeep, it was worth it. It was also worth noting that the village mana regenerated. At a rate of the total mana divided by the hours in the day, $1000/24$, the four hundred would be replenished after about ten hours. Also, he didn’t really have another use for the mana right now. He selected *Confusing Mist* and activated it.

Richter felt a pressure build within his body, a feeling like he was being filled with cool, wet wind. It reminded him of standing on the boardwalk, watching a storm roll in from the ocean. The feeling built until it seemed to press against the thin boundaries of his skin. All of a sudden, a roiling sea of grey mist exploded from his body in all directions. It billowed and flowed, building in speed and obscuring everything in sight. As suddenly as it started, the flow from his body stopped. The mist continued to roll back

until it reached the edges of the village. There it hung like a grey curtain, making any visualization beyond five to ten feet from the edge near-impossible.

What happened to my immunity to the mist, Richter thought. What good is this spell if I blind myself too? Just as he was thinking that the spell might be more trouble than it was worth, his vision suddenly sharpened and he could see just as well as before the spell was cast. Strangely, he could also see the mist, though it in no way inhibited his vision. Now satisfied with the results of the spell, he nodded happily to himself and told Futen to lead the way to the dungeon.

As the three of them moved west out of the village, they crossed into the mist, pulling the ponies behind them, though they emptied the saddlebags first. After ten feet, they were completely surrounded by walls of grey. The mist posed no problem for Richter, or Futen apparently. It was only a few minutes more, however, when he heard Sion call out to him. “Richter, where are you?”

Looking back, Richter saw him clearly only six or seven feet away. Taking a step closer, he saw Sion’s eyes orient on him sharply. “It is like you just appeared out of thin air,” the sprite said.

“That is so strange, I could see you clearly. Let’s test this for a

moment. Try to follow me.”

Stepping away, he moved forward, but in less than a minute Sion called out for him to stop again. Looking back, the sprite once again seemed to be scanning his surroundings. Richter walked towards him and became visible once he was within a few feet. “What happened?”

“I was following you. First, you became indistinct and then I could not see you at all. I would have sworn that to find you I would have had to go well to the right of the direction that you just came back from. Did you move to the side after I lost you?”

“No,” Richter replied. “I came straight back. This new enchantment is more powerful than I thought. Wait a moment.” Opening the village interface, he worked through the options until reaching *Confusing Mist*. Focusing upon the tab, he found the section for Immunity. Thinking of Sion, his name appeared under the drop down list. Glancing at his Companion, Richter saw the sprite’s eyes widen.

“With this magic, none will be able to stand against us. We will see them from a distance while they will constantly be confused and separated,” Sion exclaimed. Richter nodded happily.

They both followed Futen deeper into the forest.

They walked along the base of the mountain that the village was

nestled against for half a day. Their pace was slow in light of the thick undergrowth of the untouched forest. The rocky prominence lowered in elevation until it turned into a series of wooded hills. They noticed a fair amount of wildlife as they made their way forward, but despite the mist concealing them, many bounded away as soon as they came in sight.

“Futen, why does it seem like the animals can see us?” Richter asked.

“Spells like *Confusing Mist* target a specific level of consciousness. Much like the spell that you found, *Weak Charm*, *Concealing Mist* will work on humanoids, but not with lesser thought forms such as in animals or vastly different thought patterns such as with certain monsters. Higher beings would also probably be immune.”

Definitely good to know, Richter thought. He had put a large amount of faith into the defensive enchantments, but it turned out that he wasn’t as safe as he had thought he had been. “How much further?”

They were just cresting a small hill. At the trough between the hill they were on and the next were two large slabs of stone leaning against one another. The dark entrance of a cave could be seen between them, leading into the interior of the hill. Of greater importance were the two skeletons aiming arrows in his direction.

Richter immediately dropped to the ground. Both arrows flew well

above him and neither seemed particularly well-aimed. Raising his head, he saw each skeleton had nocked another arrow and was scanning the hill he and Sion were lying upon. Thankfully, the mist seemed to be concealing their position. It was only his talking that had given away their general position. They backed down from the top of the hill until the cave entrance was once again hidden from sight. They pulled the ponies even further back before tying the lead ropes to a tree a hundred yards further into the forest.

“Futen,” Richter said in a furious whisper.

“Yes, my lord,” the orb said in his normal voice.

“Softer,” he hissed. “Speak softer when we are around enemies.”

“Yes, my lord,” he responded in a more subdued tone.

“In the future,” Richter said in clipped tones, “let us know well in advance that enemies are close by. Specifically, before we are shot by them.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Turning to his Companion, Richter said, “Wait here a moment, Sion. Futen, turn invisible and come with me.” Richter walked back to the hill, and then circled to the left of his previous approach. He made his way to the top as silently as he could. Neither skeleton had moved far from its position in front of the cave. Concentrating on the one on the right, he used his *Analyze* skill.

Skeleton: Lvl 6. Health 160. Mana 0. Stamina 120. A basic reanimated skeleton. The intelligence of this monster is lacking, but it is wholly devoted to whatever task it was reanimated for.

Moving his gaze to the one on the left, he used *Analyze* again.

Skeleton: Lvl 5. Health 150. Mana 0. Stamina 120. A basic reanimated skeleton. The intelligence of this monster is lacking, but it is wholly devoted to whatever task it was reanimated for.

A bit disappointed about the lack of information, he shrugged. *Analyze* was still only level one, he reminded himself. He looked forward to gaining more information as he increased the skill.

He backed down the hill to Sion. “There are only two,” he whispered. “The mist will hide us unless we get too close. Let’s make our way up and use Imbued arrows to destroy them. You take the one on the left. I’ll take the one on the right.”

They crawled up to the top of the hill and nocked arrows. Building power around his arrow it began to glow golden while Sion’s glowed blue. As the glow intensified, however, the skeletons oriented on them and began to prepare arrows of their own. Knowing they were out of time, he released

his arrow, Sion's streaking forward right after Richter's arrow struck his target's shoulder. The skeleton spun away, collapsing against the hill.

Sion's arrow struck his skeleton center mass causing it to be knocked down. The skeleton Richter had struck was back on its feet in an instant, minus its right arm. The first shot had knocked the entire appendage free. It had drawn a sword from a scabbard at its waist and was running towards him. He took quick aim and shot again. In his hurry, he lacked the focus to properly *Imbue* the arrow. The normal arrow only caused the skeleton to miss a step before it started charging up the hill again. A second imbued arrow from Sion struck it in the hip, causing it to flop back onto its chest, though. It struggled to rise with its remaining arm bracing against the hill.

An arrow struck Richter in his chest. The simple arrowhead was not powerful enough to penetrate his Chest Plate of the Wood Sprite, thankfully, but it did knock him off balance and removed fourteen health. As he recovered, he looked at the skeleton shooting at him, and saw it had already drawn another arrow and was attempting to line up another shot. He dove to the side, an arrow whistling by only a foot to his right. He was immensely glad that his increased Agility granted him better dodge. Having no time to orient himself for a counterattack, Richter picked his head up to look at the skeleton and hoped he could dodge the next attack. What he saw was the wonderful sight of Sion's imbued arrow striking a critical blow to the

skeleton's head. The skull was not only removed, but it shattered the facial bones as well. The bones of the body collapsed into a pile.

The second skeleton was back on its feet and was unsteadily moving towards them with its sword in hand. Drawing his short sword, Richter feinted. It slashed at where his face would have been, but instead of moving forward, he had bent down to strike it in the knee. The skeleton's blow missed entirely, but Richter's did not. Its already weakened magical bonds could not withstand Richter's strike and its lower leg flew off, causing it to fall on its face again. One more strike to the back of its neck caused its head to fly off and ended the fight.

Sion stood with an arrow drawn and pointed at the cave, waiting to see if the noise of the fight brought more enemies out. Richter retrieved his bow and did the same, but none came. Richter eased the draw on his bow and examined the opening.

You have found: Seasoned Cave

“Futen,” Richer said.

“Yes, my lord?” a disembodied voice answered from somewhere in front of him.

“Stay invisible. Scout ahead into the cave, let us know what you find.”

“As you wish.”

The two of them waited for a few minutes. As they did, they gathered the weapons of the skeletons they had destroyed as well as whatever arrows could be salvaged. The skeletons’ gear was all trash and poor quality, but there might be a use for it later. Not needing to wait long, the remnant appeared back in front of them. “There are two caverns inside the cave, one after another. There are three skeletons with blades in the first cavern. A short tunnel connects the two. In the second chamber, there are five more skeletons. There is a stairway leading down at the back of the chamber, but that is as far as I could go.”

“Why couldn’t you go further? Was there a barrier you couldn’t pass?”

“I am bound to the village. It is only because you have absorbed the Heart Crystal that I can go so far afield. Normally, I cannot move more than half a mile from the village borders. Now that we are past that point, I cannot be more than one hundred yards from you.”

Knowing that there were eight enemies within one hundred yards, it seemed clear that there would be close quarter fighting. “Futen, can you make your light brighter? Bright enough to see by in a dark cave?”

“Yes, Master, but away from the village, I will not be able to

maintain a bright light for more than several minutes without rest.”

“Does the mist go into the cave? Can we rely on its concealment?”
Sion asked.

“No, the mist stops at the cave mouth.”

“Okay then,” Richter replied. “On my signal, become invisible, and go to the top of the first cavern. Wait five seconds, then flare brightly.”

Looking at Sion he asked, “Have your mana and stamina recovered?” At his Companion’s nod, Richter explained the plan. “We strike immediately after Futen flares the light. Hopefully it will distract them. Take the one in the middle. I will hit the one on the right. Keep firing as quickly as you can to keep distance between us and them. Now go, Futen!”

Placing an arrow to the string, he focused on his aura. It surrounded the arrow almost instantly, and he began to pour his mana into it. He allowed the mana to flow for three seconds, reasoning that the deeper they got into the dungeon, the stronger the opponents would be. He began to see streaks of black flow over the gold aura and moved into the cave mouth, Sion to his right. Just before entering, a grayish-white light flared. They stepped inside, and both immediately took aim. As hoped, the blast of light had taken the attention of the skeletons for key seconds.

Triggering his *Focus* skill, the skeleton he was targeting seemed to

jump towards him. Easily taking aim at its chest, he released. The golden streak with a black tinge hit the skeleton's chest, knocking it back to the cave wall. The charged arrow made a deafening boom in the confined space, causing a ringing in his ears. Sion's arrow blasted into the skeleton in the middle, which was holding a great sword, making an even greater explosive clap.

The undamaged skeleton immediately started running at them with a sword in one hand and a buckler in the other. It moved with the same uncanny speed of the skeletons outside. It just seemed wrong that something dead could move so quickly. Despite that, Sion's Dexterity gave him excellent combat speed. He was able to strike the skeleton two more times before it could cross the sixty yards to the cave entrance. The first shot hit its buckler and was deflected up above its bony head, but it served a purpose by knocking the buckler out of the way. Sion's second shot exploded into the skeleton's pelvis separating its top and bottom half.

Richter had imbued another arrow with magical force and attacked his initial opponent again, but missed as the skeleton dodged to the side. The failed shot was not a small thing. He had already lost more than half of his mana. He quickly drew his short sword and braced to meet the bony bastard.

Its cutlass swung in a vicious arc intending to decapitate him. He blocked the blow with his short sword, but it then swung a bony fist at his

face. The blow connected! He reeled back from the hit, pain exploding in his jaw and his health decreasing by 8%. Stars occupied his vision, and not knowing where the next strike would come from, Richter let his legs fold and he rolled onto his back then pushed up with his arms to land on all fours.

The skeleton was closing again, but was struck by Sion's blue arrow, knocking it back. The sprite immediately struck the skeleton with another imbued arrow. The speed of his attacks were impressive, but despite high dexterity, Sion still needed time to put any real power into his Imbue Arrow skill.

Richter threw himself back into the battle, a backhand swing striking the neck of the skeleton which had struck him. The combination of blows was enough to make it collapse into its component parts. Suddenly he heard, "Duck!"

Richter dropped to the floor. The middle skeleton had rejoined the fight and swung horizontally with its iron great sword. The attack missed, but it used the momentum of its swing to bring the blade above its head, intending to strike down and cleave him in two. Again his Agility saved him as he desperately rolled to the side. The force of the missed strike made vibrations in the cave floor that he could feel and the cavern rung from the sword's impact.

The skeleton was overbalanced by its failed attack, so Richter capitalized on the opportunity and swung his sword at the back of its left knee. On his back, he couldn't put too much strength into the blow, but it was enough to make his enemy fall forward. Sion's arrow, a brilliant blue of imbued magic, hit its clavicle, tearing away both shoulder and head. As with the previous skeletons, removal of the skull broke whatever magic was animating it. The bones fell apart. A commotion attracted Richter's attention. The first of the skeletons from the second chamber came running into the battle. Sounds from the tunnel clearly indicated others were close behind.

"Run!" Richter shouted. He jumped back onto his feet, and followed his own advice. The half-skeleton Sion had hit early in the fight raised itself up on one arm, its sword cocked to swipe at him. Sion shot it in the back before turning to run. It collapsed like its three friends, and Richter ran past. Once out of the cave, Richter pulled Sion with him to the right, moving twenty feet into the mist before turning and drawing his bow. Neither began to *Imbue* their arrows. While Richter was sure they both remembered that the light from their arrows could draw the skeleton's attention, he was equally sure that Sion must have already used the greater part of his mana.

"Move back," Richter breathed silently. He began to take his first step as the skeletons spilled out of the cave. Two had bows, one a bastard sword and the fourth a heavy dagger and round shield. The fifth was slightly

larger and held an axe. Knowing Sion needed more time to recover his mana, they continued moving back slowly and quietly. They discovered a large fallen tree behind them. Huddling behind it, Richter looked over and focused upon the largest skeleton, invoking *Analyze*.

Skeleton Warrior: Lvl 9. Health 310/310. Mana 0/0. Stamina 220/220.

This is the reanimated skeleton of a fallen warrior. More time was devoted to reanimating these remains compared to a simple skeleton. Its bones are of greater density and its ferocity will be increased.

“FML,” he muttered under his breath.

“What does that mean?” Sion quietly asked as they moved back and took shelter behind a fallen tree.

“I’ll tell you later. Futen, where are you?”

The grey sphere appeared in front of them with its inner light muted.

“Can those things hurt you? Can you be hurt?”

“I can be destroyed by strong magic, but I am nearly immune to physical attacks, my lord.”

“Good! This is the plan. Those three skeletons almost kicked our ass. We need the concealment of the mist to destroy the rest of these things. So we are going to wait a moment for our mana to regenerate then I want you to

turn invisible and make a loud noise to draw their attention. We will power our arrows and attack. While that skeleton warrior is almost definitely the biggest damage dealer, those archers are the biggest threat to us out here in the open.” He turned to Sion, “So we fire, and fire at them again, until they are down. Then we fade back and split up. Once enough time passes, they won’t be able to find us in the mist unless we power up. So we hit and move, hit and move. Meanwhile, Futen, you move around and make noise and flare lights to confuse them. Can you speak in a different voice than the one you always use?”

“Than the one you always use,” Richter’s own voice spoke back to him from the remnant.

Pausing for a moment he said, “Okay, new rule. Never do that again unless I ask... it’s super creepy.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Futen replied in his normal monotone.

At his current mana regeneration rate, he got one point back every ten seconds. He was at about 50% of his mana, so that would take a little over ten minutes.

After the requisite time had passed, he looked at Sion, “Are you ready?” His friend nodded so he said, “Let’s move.”

They left the shelter of the tree, still seeing the five skeletons outside

of the cave entrance in a rough half circle. They stood nearly motionless, heads turning slowly, searching for some indication of the duo's location. Futen phased out of view, and Richter and Sion nocked arrows and waited. A white flash and voice from the other side of the skeletons' position was their cue. All of the skeletons turned towards the improvised flash bang. A blue and golden glow immediately flared into existence behind them. Both Richter and Sion waited three seconds, the glow growing brighter and more intense, and then they released. The skeletal warrior seemed cognizant of the danger behind it before the other monsters were. It squatted, bringing its double headed axe in front of its skull like a shield. Its action was useless though, because it wasn't their intended target. Two blurs, one golden and the other blue, converged on the chest of one archer, shattering it instantly. The concussive force of two close-proximity, imbued strikes staggered the other skeletons.

Sion launched a second strike and then a third at the remaining archer, taking only the minimal time to power the arrows. His goal was to keep it off balance. Though neither shot landed with crushing force, the skeleton was staggered. It allowed Sion to once again imbue an arrow with extra force, and land a blow to its left chest. It was not destroyed outright, but one arm was knocked free. While it wasn't dead, it would certainly no longer be a threat as an archer.

The three melee skeletons had already started running towards them. As discussed, Sion took off to the right while Richter moved to the left. Each ran following the slight curve of their respective hills until the skeletons lost sight of them. It took about a minute, but by making short changes in direction periodically it became clear when the skeletons lost the trail. They were once again safe in the protection of the mist. Without speaking, the skeletons all seemed to arrive at the conclusion that they should return to guard the cave mouth. They stopped searching and returned to stand in front of the entrance. All was silent.

Sion and Richter looked at the unaware monsters, breathing as quietly as possible. They had regrouped and positioned themselves at the top of a hill looking down on the bony creatures. Another white flare was their cue to resume attack. It occurred right in the midst of the skeletons causing a small amount of pandemonium. A blue arrow struck the skeleton with the shield in the back, the location of the hit and its surprise nature dealing extra damage. A golden arrow struck the warrior in the shoulder, but it seemed to simply shrug the blow off. Both lesser skeletons moved after Sion, who fired with his usual alacrity, one arrow per second. The barrage staggered each skeleton in turn but they pushed forward, closing the distance to the sprite. He kept moving back as he shot though, and each skeleton was struck twice struggling up the hill before Sion ran off a short distance and then started the

onslaught again.

The skeletal warrior rushed Richter, axe pulled back ready to swing. He moved to the left, drew his bow and began to imbue his arrow. As soon as the glow began, the skeleton warrior moved towards him with intimidating speed. Judging by the information he had seen with Analyze, Richter knew he was no match for this opponent in a standup fight. Three more times he moved off and attempted to attack the warrior, but each time he could not do more than summon his aura before the warrior was almost upon him. He feared moving further away lest he lose the warrior's interest. It might pursue Sion, whose own battle was not concluded based upon the blue flares that could be seen over the hill. Looking around, an idea occurred to Richter though.

“Futen, draw it up the hill. Make a gold flare and use my voice.”

A moment later, Richter's own voice could be heard up the hill, and the skeletal warrior followed, its axe swinging. Meanwhile Richter moved down the hill and began to *Imbue* his arrow. After one second, his arrow glowed golden. After two seconds, the warrior noticed him, and turned to run down the hill. After three seconds, black streaks once again shot over the golden aura surrounding the arrow. The warrior ran closer, now only 20 yards away. It was building tremendous speed as it sprinted downhill. After four seconds, the black streaks flowed up and down the arrow and a high pitched

whine grew in Richter's ears. The warrior began its swing obviously aiming for decapitation, only to trip over a fallen tree that it didn't see until too late. It tumbled forward in a clattering racket and lay prone, only 12 feet away from Richter. Five seconds had passed and black streaks moved over the arrow too fast to see. Richter released and struck the warrior at point blank range directly in the head.

The imbued arrow didn't just impact the warrior, it rendered the skull into pieces. The blow collapsed the head of the warrior and the force continued on, destroying its neck, chest and upper vertebrae. The shockwave emanating from the strike drove Richter off of his feet. His head struck a branch and he was knocked unconscious.

The next sensation he was aware of was a very small hand slapping him across the face. This did not bother him very much, but the follow-up backhand across the other cheek just seemed rude and excessive. Blinking back to consciousness, he said clearly and succinctly, "Skop furgin hidin mi uuu fookene men e me."

"Quit lying around. Time to get back to work."

Taking several slow, deep breaths, Richter finally controlled his own personal, spinning universe and sat up. Sion stood beside him. In front of him was the ruined frame of the skeleton warrior. Still dazed, Richter looked

around, hoping that the danger had passed, but still lacking the ability to really care.

Sion looked at him with a confused expression, “What is FML?”

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When Richter was finally able to stand, he searched the warrior. The monster had been clad in rags. The only thing of value was its axe.

You have received:
Steel Battle Axe

Damage: 7-10 (Max damage 12-19)
Durability: 17/40
Item Class: Common.
Quality: Average
Weight: 4.7 kg
Requirement: Strength 14

Richter really missed mobs dropping random loot. Having to search the dead was a pain in the butt compared to simply opening an inventory window. To be fair though, it wasn't really realistic to find a bottle of fire resistance inside of a bear or to gain a healing herb from killing an air elemental.

They walked back to the cave entrance, both gnawing on healing herbs. The herbs did not have the instant healing of Richter's Minor Ring of Healing. They also didn't heal as much or as fast as the potions they had found, but they were still better than nothing. Since his acquisition of the

Herb Lore skill he had started making a habit of examining any interesting plants that he might find.

You have found:
Forest Sage

Herb Class: Common.
Possible Uses: Eating this will restore 10 points of health over 300 seconds

As they walked, Richter focused on a flashing icon in the corner of his vision. A faint smile crossed his face as he saw there had been a benefit of all that hide and seek in the mist.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 4 in **Stealth**. You now inflict +8% greater damage during stealthed attacks. +8% to Concealment.*

They gathered the other weapons and shields from the destroyed skeletons, and left them in a pile at the entrance. Like the warrior, these skeletons had nothing of value besides their weapons. A quick scan by Futen found no other enemies in the immediate vicinity. Moving into the cave, they swept up the remaining weapons and placed them with the others.

They entered the tunnel connecting the two chambers with Richter in the lead, sword in hand. If Futen had missed some creature, he would only have a split second to defend himself, not nearly enough time to aim and shoot his bow. Sion followed two paces behind, arrow nocked and ready. Richter moved carefully into the second cavern, but as soon as he placed his

foot down inside the chamber, the floor at his feet began to glow blue white.

“Move!” Sion shouted. The sprite grabbed the back of Richter’s belt and pulled. Unfortunately, Sion lacked the strength to actually move him back. The sprite’s efforts weren’t wholly wasted though. Sion stopped him from moving any farther forward, which saved him from the worst part of the trap. The light intensified, and with a loud *zzsst*, bolts of electricity shot into the air, bouncing off the sides of the hallway.

Both he and Sion fell to the ground.

*You are **Stunned** for the next 3.0 seconds!*

Richter’s body was locked in spasm, pain coursing through him. He saw that whatever had just happened had also removed thirty-five health. The next three seconds felt like an hour. Even after the paralysis wore off, they lay on the ground for a bit.

“Thaatttt suckkked.” Richter moaned as quietly as he could

“I think I will move in front from here on out, Richter,” Sion’s voice was tight with pain and annoyance.

“Fine! Futen, what WAS that?” he whispered harshly.

“You seem to have stepped upon a lightning ward, my lord.”

“Why didn’t you warn us?”

“I was only scanning for enemies. Though in retrospect, it would have been prudent to also look for traps.”

“You think?” Richter’s throat was tight from holding back his near shout.

“Yes, my lord,” the remnant paused for a second, “I do.”

“Pink would be too good for you, you damn night light. I’m going to find a way to make you burnt ochre. Now scan for traps.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

The orb flowed around the room occasionally hovering in one place. A circle would slowly appear on the floor to the side of its position. Richter noticed that even the remnant did not pass directly over the wards. He walked over and examined one of the traps

The ward was two feet in diameter and had small sigils lining the inner edge of its circumference. Now that it was glowing it was easy to avoid, but Richter marveled at how such a thing could be deadly. If he had stepped onto a ward while the skeletons were still around, the bony bastards would have killed him in the three seconds it took to regain his feet. Richter shook his head and went back to stand by Sion.

While they waited for Futen to finish scanning the room, both he and Sion ate more healing herbs. Herb Lore certainly did come in handy as a

skill. If not for finding these herbs, the only options for accelerated healing would have been his ring or the two healing potions they had found. Thankfully, the herbs were sprinkled throughout the forest, and they had been able to pick some each night.

Richter had the bright idea of eating two at once, hoping for an increase in the healing-time ratio. He had found that the herbs would simply restore twenty points over six hundred seconds. Well, beggars can't be choosers, he thought. Eating the herbs also had the added benefit of slowly improving his Herb Lore skill. Sion assured him he would get better results from each healing herb as his Herb Lore improved, and he would also have an easier time finding more potent herbs.

In the time that it took for the herbs to do their work, Futen had completed his search of the room and was again hovering in front of them. Richter certainly felt better, even if he was a bit hungry. Sion assured him that was a common side effect of the green medicinals.

Three circles, each two feet in diameter, were scattered throughout the room, glowing softly. These were easily avoided, but a fourth was three feet in diameter and had a second line of runes inside of the first. It also completely covered the entrance to a set of stairs leading down.

“Okay, so how do we get past it?” Richter asked, “Should we jump

over? Could you make that jump?” The last was directed at Sion.

Sion looked back at him, “It’s a magical seal of power. It’s meant as a barrier and a trap.”

“Yeah, I have picked up on that,” Richter replied.

“Yes, well,” Sion said slowly as if explaining something to an idiot. “It wouldn’t be very good as either a barrier OR a trap if it could be defeated by,” the sprite paused slightly, “skipping.”

Feeling like a moron, Richter just gave a short nod. He really didn’t know what he had done to deserve a Companion who was basically a dickish Keebler elf.

“Futen, what can you do about those wards?”

“These are lightning wards, my lord. Lightning is the province of Air magic. I should be able to unravel the ward and allow the energy to dissipate. Also you might be able to set off the ward from a distance with a sufficiently strong magical strike.”

“Are you saying that I can learn lightning magic?”

“Yes, my lord. As you know, you can learn and master Life, Dark, Air and Water magic, thanks to your connection with the Place of Power. Each Power has certain requirements that must be met, but it is possible.”

Richter had noticed a Magic tab on his village interface, but as all the options beneath had been greyed out, he had not paid it much attention. Looking again, he could now see that there were a list of lightning spells below the air spells. The weakest lightning spell required skill level 10 in Air Magic.

“Why didn’t the skeletons set off the ward when they crossed it?” Sion asked.

“The wards are cast to attack only the enemies of those determined by the caster,” Futen replied.

“Can you change the way we are ‘determined’ by the ward? Can you make us be seen as friendlies, and everything else be seen as an enemy?”

“No, my lord.”

“Well that’s a shame,” Richter said. “Judging by how strong these enemies were on the first floor. I can only imagine what the next level is going to be like. Okay Futen, disarm it.”

Both he and Sion took a step back, being a bit wary of the remnant’s judgement after their, well, electrocution. The ward began to glow. The outer circle of runes began to turn, followed by the inner circle. Both changed directions multiple times, reminding Richter of the tumblers on a safe. A few more turns and both circles stopped rotating. There was a final flare of light

and the ward floated up into the air until it dissipated like smoke on the wind.

Richter began to move down the stairs, until Sion cleared his throat. The sprite cocked his head and raised his eyebrows as if to say ‘Really?’ What the sprite actually said was, “We have been over this. Futen, scout ahead.”

The remnant phased out of visible sight, and Sion and Richter were left waiting. The orb reappeared before long and said, “There is one large chamber. At the end are a set of black doors. In front of it are two of the larger skeletons.”

“What type of weapons do they have?” Richter asked.

“One is carrying a large axe and the other a larger sword. They seem alert, my lord.”

“Well that’s not surprising. A deaf post could have heard all the racket we were making,” Richter commented. “If there are only two though, we can take them. How far from the steps are they?”

“About eighty yards, my lord.”

“Is there light?”

“Very little.”

“Then the plan is the same as before. Go in front of us, and draw

their attention with sound and light. Sion, we both hit the one on the left with powered strikes, and once it is down or they cross more than half the distance to the steps, we retreat back up the stairs. If they follow, we will stagger our shots. You strike and knock it back, retreat, and I will do the same. If they get too close, we retreat to the mist.”

Sion took the lead, moving noiselessly down the steps. They waited a few steps up from the bottom, so as not to be seen. When they saw the flash, Richter and Sion both moved. Richter used *Focus* to draw his target close into view. He powered his arrow for three seconds and then released. Sion’s arrow struck a moment before his. Despite both shots connecting with a near deafening *boom*, the damn thing was still standing.

At least the strikes had kept it from making any forward progress, Richter thought to himself. He spared a moment to use *Analyze*.

Skeleton Warrior: Lvl 11. Health 230/350. Mana 0. Stamina 240/240...

Well that would be why, he thought.

Sion, for his part, had kept launching powered strike after powered strike into the already injured skeleton. The other skeleton warrior was halfway down the cavern. Richter switched his aim to that one and powered his arrow for one second before releasing. The arrow struck the skeleton in

the arm, flinging it off balance with its great sword scraping the ground.

One thing became clear in the opening moments of the fight, Richter had underestimated the speed and strength of the warriors. The tactic of withering fire would not work. The skeletons would run them down and strike from behind before they could reach the safety of the mists. Richter fired one more imbued arrow at the closest skeleton, further knocking it off balance and then drew his short sword. Stepping forward, he swung down as hard as he could and struck his enemy's great sword, knocking the weapon out of the skeleton's bony grasp. In retaliation, the warrior raked its outstretched hand across Richter's chest creating an ear splitting screech as it scoured his breast plate. Spinning low, Richter swung his sword in an arc, striking the warrior on its knee. A chip fell off, but the leg remained attached. The warrior fell upon him, and its not inconsiderable weight drove him onto his back. The bones clearly had greater density than they should. He grabbed one bony wrist, but its other dug into Richter's shoulder. The tips of its fingers pierced his flesh. It dug deeper into the meat of his muscle as it curled its fingers into a partial fist, on the inside of his body.

A scream tore from Richter's throat as he struggled against the skeleton. His left hand scrambled for purchase against it, but that arm was weakened to the point of uselessness with the skeleton's fingers inside his deltoid. His other hand tried to keep the skeleton's free hand from ripping his

throat out and taking his life. Richter looked up into the insane grin of the skeleton, its mouth partially open. His stamina was running out fast and he felt himself weakening. Panic was taking over, which might have been the only thing keeping the pain from rendering him unconscious.

He struggled with the creature for long moments, panting, caught in a stalemate that he knew could not last much longer. Just when he felt he might succumb, he saw Sion's sword dig point-first into the side of the warrior's neck vertebrae. The sprite had jumped onto the skeleton's back. With his sword wedged into its spine, Sion wrenched up with all of his strength, using his blade like a lever. With a heave, and an audible snap, the bones of the neck separated. The head went flying, and the rest of the body collapsed into its separate parts, on top of him. The hand remained intact and inside of him though. Sion placed his knee on Richter's chest, pulling swiftly, and wrenched the skeletal fingers out of his friend's shoulder. A large amount of blood and a few pieces of flesh came out as well. Richter could barely see straight as he reached into his pouch and drank one of the red potions he had taken from the goblin chief in the fight that already seemed so long ago. He triggered the healing ring as well. The pain began to lessen but his health did not seem to recover as quickly as it should. He saw a symbol in the shape of a red tear drop at the corner of his vision. Focusing on it revealed its meaning.

*You are **Bleeding**. You will lose three health per second for the next fourteen*

seconds.

Well that explains that. Sion handed him a few healing herbs and he stuffed all three into his mouth, chewing, trying to ignore the bitter flavor. He swallowed them all as quickly as possible. It seemed the potion and herbs would work in conjunction, allowing for increased health regeneration over a period of time. For the next few minutes, Richter sat in pain, waiting for his wounds to heal. Sion stood nearby, staring at the tall, black doors at the end of the hall, but no further enemies appeared.

“Futen.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Are we going to run out of time? Will the skeletons that we have killed come back if we don’t move fast enough?”

“No, my lord. Some dungeons are indeed bound with a power that brings back any vanquished enemies quickly, but this dungeon is fixed. Unless you leave the dungeon for a prolonged period, slain enemies will not reappear. I cannot give any assurance that new enemies will not wander in, however.”

“Do you mean more skeletons could be coming from outside?”

Richter asked with alarm in his voice.

“Yes, my lord. I have been scanning for enemies as instructed,

however, and have detected no hostile creatures other than the skeletons you have encountered.”

Not fully reassured, he tried for a bit of levity. “You seem to make a habit of jumping onto enemy’s backs, buddy,” Richter said to Sion.

“Only because you seem to be making a habit of lying on your back with big things on top of you. You should stop that. It’s no way to find love,” Sion replied, a cocky grin spreading across his face.

“Shut up. I’m still healing,” Richter groaned.

Despite having to suffer not only his physical wounds, but also Sion’s twisted humor, there was a bright side to the fight. Upon the death of the warriors Richter had been awarded with a prompt.

TRING!

You have reached level 7! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice. Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 3 in **Imbue Arrow**. +15% damage. +15% speed of mana flow.*

Richter wasted no time and allocated the necessary points needed to use the *Weak Charm* spell. Two points went into Intelligence, two into

Charisma and the last two he placed into Dexterity. The increased attack speed of the sprite could not be underestimated. His 25% proficiency increase he held off on as none of his skills was far enough along to level.

Richter pulled out the spell book. The blurry lines that were on the page the last time he had looked at it resolved into clear text. He began to read and quickly finished the first page. The next page turned of its own volition. After he read that one, the process repeated. This happened faster and faster until the turning pages were a breeze on his face. With the last page done, the book slammed shut and crumpled to dust.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Weak Charm**. You can convince a target, up to level 8, that they hold you in the highest regard. If cast on an enemy during battle they will fight for you. Casting this upon a creature lowers their regard for you after the spell wears off. This is a spell of Life. Cost: 60 mana. Duration: 1 hour. Range: 20 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: 10 minutes.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Life Magic**. The basic element, Life, is in every blade of grass and every beast of the forest. Master this Basic Element and you can even more beyond the reach of death.*

His wound closed while he learned the spell. Richter stood and

looked at the black doors. It was time to finish this.

“Can you scout what’s inside, Futen?”

“No, my lord, not until the door is opened.”

“Well then, no point waiting around. Let’s do what we came here for. Futen, as soon as we open the door, illuminate the room and find any traps as quickly as possible. Sion, kill stuff,” Richter said, getting a vicious smile in return from his Companion.

Striding to the end of the chamber, Richter flung open the doors and moved inside. Futen lit the room, hovering above their heads. A black altar was in the middle of the room. A skeleton stood behind it wearing black robes and holding a long staff. The staff appeared to be one large bone. It was at least five feet long, blue in color and the top of it had spiderweb cracks that were the black of dead flesh. Small spheres of black light shone in the center of the skeleton’s eye sockets, leaving no doubt that it was staring directly at them. It was flanked by two skeletal warriors both holding greatswords. Next to the priest though, was the show stopper. A grayish humanoid creature sat on its haunches, wearing tattered rags as a loincloth. It had weeping skin and festering sores. The stench coming off of it was horrible and overwhelming. It looked up at them with animal-like intelligence, arching its back as it prepared to leap.

“A ghoul!” Sion shouted.

The robed skeleton waved its hand, and the doors slammed shut with an ominous boom, locking them in.

Then Richter heard something even more disturbing from his Companion.

“Fuck my life!”

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“Don’t let the ghoul touch you,” Sion shouted, “it can paralyze.” The sprite drew, nocked and imbued an arrow. He released and it streaked towards the closest skeleton warrior. He then switched to the other warrior. His shots made a constant staccato, buying time before they could close the distance, and bring their horrible strength to bear. Richter fired his golden arrow at the skeleton mage, but a blue disc of hazy energy appeared from the tip of staff. It acted as a shield. His arrow stopped well short of the skeletal mage, creating a loud bang, but having little other effect. The ghoul had jumped over the altar, and was quickly closing the distance to Richter.

Putting all of his faith in his new spell, Richter cast out his hand and invoked *Weak Charm*. The one-second cast time allowed the ghoul to leap. It was in the air by the time Richter had finished the incantation. Its jump easily crossed the remaining distance between them. The stinking weight of its body crushed Richter into the wall. He held his arms out, ready to wrestle the creature to the ground, but it easily gave ground. It simply stood there, staring at him. The spell had worked. With a grim smile on his face he pointed at the

skeleton mage, “Sick’em, boy!”

The ghoul rushed at the mage who had been chanting a spell that would almost definitely have ruined Richter’s whole day. The mage was forced to break off its spell to fire a bolt of frost at the ghoul, knocking it to the side. Unfortunately, the caster did not seem fazed by spell feedback from the interrupted spell.

Richter pulled his attention from the two fighting monsters. He drew and fired upon the skeletons that were perilously close to Sion. His attack pulled the attention of the axe wielding warrior. The energy seemed to flow around his arrow easier than before, his increase in Imbue Arrow skill level making a small but perceptible difference. He was able to land two strikes on the warrior before it took a swing at him. Ducking under the blow, he planted his feet and rammed it with his shoulder, knocking it back a step. He quickly nocked another arrow and fired at point blank range directly into its face. He had not had time to imbue the arrow, but the shot still connected solidly with its skull. It fell upon its back with a loud clatter. Standing over it, he charged his arrow, and shot at the connection of its neck and body. The skull flew free and the bones lost cohesion.

Looking to Sion, the sprite was dodging his opponent’s swings with no chance of counterattack. Drawing a bead on the warrior, Richter imbued his arrow, then shouted “Drop down!”

Sion rolled to the right to avoid the skeleton's sword, providing Richter with a clear shot. He took it... it connected. The second skeleton dropped into a pile of bones. Turning his attention back to the altar, he heard a piteous shriek. The skeleton mage had plunged its staff into the chest of the ghoul. The creature still struggled to reach the mage and rend the caster with its claws, but ice began to spread from where the staff had pierced its body. After only three seconds, the ice had completely frozen its torso. With a sharp twist, the skeleton freed its staff. The sudden jerk sent the two halves of the ghoul's body in different directions. Blue and black icy shards fell in a tinkling sound around the base of the altar.

Hoping to catch the mage off-balance, Richter drew an arrow, imbued it and released. He didn't have Sion's speed, though. The seconds that it took to do so was enough to allow the mage to erect his shield again. The shot was stopped feet away, splashing harmlessly against the blue circle. Sion regained his feet and fired an arrow, but with a pulse of power from the staff, the circle widened in diameter, blocking his shot as well.

"Flank it!" Richter shouted, not letting up on his rate of fire as he moved to the right. Seeing Sion's confusion, he exhaled in frustration and shouted again, "Move to the other side and keep shooting." They both kept hammering at the skeleton's shield, moving to either side to get past its defenses. With another flare from its staff, the shield grew into a sphere

covering it from all directions. It now had a distinctly softer shade of blue, however. They continued firing imbued shots. It was clear that it was a race to see who would run out of mana first, the Companions or the skeleton mage.

Taking a moment, Richter swallowed his mana potion. While Sion continued the assault, Richter powered his arrow for one, two, three, four, five, and now six seconds. The black streaks flowed thick over the golden arrow, and Richter felt the magic begin to flare out of control. Not able to wait any longer, he released. The arrow hit the sphere, but unlike the previous shots, the magic surrounding it did not immediately wink out. The arrow seemed to push at the protective sphere, bowing it in. The sphere buckled, and then, in a torrent of light and sound, it exploded. The eruption knocked both Sion and Richter backwards to the ground. Blinking clear the spots in his vision, Richter quickly made his way back to the altar. The skeleton was lying on its back, frozen. This time, apparently the spell backlash had stunned the mage. It was helpless for a few moments. Unsheathing his sword, Richter delivered the coup de grace, severing its head. Looking down, he saw the dark light fade from its eye sockets.

*Congratulations! You have cleared your first dungeon. Bonus **500 XP**.*

*Congratulations! You have finished the quest: **Unlock your Power I**. You have found and cleansed a site of ancient magic. As Master of the local Place*

*of Power you may choose one of the Powers that comprise your domain. Your options are Life, Dark, Air or Water. Make your choice to close the quest. Reward: **3,000 XP**.*

Choosing a Power will give you 50% effectiveness increase to spells of that branch. You will also have 50% resistance to spells of that Power. Unique to being a Master of a Place of Power, however, is your access to each Power's specialized ability.

*Life Ability: “**Bounty of Life**” +30% growth for the physical manifestation of your Place of Power*

*Dark Ability: “**Hidden Treasures**” +30% yield from treasure*

*Air Ability: “**Fast Learner**” +30% rate to skill advancement*

*Water Ability: “**Tranquil Soul**” -30% cost for spells*

Richter's exhaustion was overwhelmed by his excitement. He closed his eyes and a smile crossed his face. While Imbue Arrow was by far his most useful skill, what had drawn him to RPGs, then MMORPGs, and finally VRMMORPGs was a desire to wield magic. The only reason he had played the character Silk was that his best friends had pigeonholed him early on to choose a rogue character. They had said it would round out the group. Even though he never told them, he had a couple other accounts that let him throw lightning bolts and cast curses with the best of them.

What he was learning now was that being a Master was amazingly powerful. It basically turned him into a magical tank. While the bonus 50% resistance and spell power was awesome, it wasn't really a huge surprise. The abilities on the other hand, might be real game changers. It made choosing one of the four so much more complicated. He focused upon his four choices in the prompt, but no further information offered itself. Oh for want of a Wiki. Based on the games he had played in the past, Dark magic was often the province of curses, summons for certain creatures, concealment spells and direct damage. Air magic usually dealt with haste, weather and electricity. Water magic typically slowed enemies, used ice-based attacks, and some emotion-based magic. Life magic of course dealt with healing, but also blessings, death wards and protection spells.

What should I do, Richter asked himself with some anxiety. It occurred to him, after a second, that this was not exactly Sophie's choice. Unlocking all four of his Powers was now a serious priority. If he truly was an immortal, he would definitely gain mastery in all four given enough time. The real question was, which of the Powers would help him the most at this present moment.

His *Weak Charm* spell had saved the day, there was no doubt about it. If the ghoul had resisted the spell, both he and Sion would most likely be dead right now. A 50% bump in its power would seriously juice up the spell.

Even high level enemies would probably succumb. Also, increased growth for his village would be clutch. On the other hand, he wasn't really ready to take advantage of that bonus yet.

Dark magic would certainly be powerful. Also, the Hidden Treasures ability was insanely tempting; 30% better loot for, like, ever! He knew people that would sell their grandma for that. You also couldn't discount Tranquil Soul: 30% less requirements needed for ANY spell?!? It was a magician's wet dream.

But then there was Air magic. The Power of haste and lightning spells. Maybe even flying or instant transport? Ultimately, it was the Air ability that made the decision for him. The Fast Learner ability seemed like the natural complement to his already existing Limitless ability. He could already learn any skill. How could he resist knowing that he would learn everything 30% faster? He made his choice.

*You have chosen: **Mastery of Air!***

*Congratulations! You have obtained the Ability: **Fast Learner**. All skill levels are obtained 30% faster.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Air Magic**. This Basic Element is the magic of speed, lightning and travel. A master of this magic can control the sky itself.*

*Congratulations! You are a **Master of Air Magic**. All Air spells cast by you are 50% stronger. You now have 50% resistance to Air magic. You can teach the skill Air magic to anyone with over a 50% affinity for the skill. You can teach specific Air spells to anyone with the appropriate skill level to learn them.*

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Weak Haste**. This spell will increase the speed of the target by 10%. This is a spell of Air, level 1. Cost: 25 mana. Duration: 10 min. Range: 5 feet. Cast Time: 1 second.
Cooldown: N/A.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Weak Errant Wind**. Increase the dodge of your party to projectiles. This spell will only work when you are outside. This is a spell of Air, level 1. Cost: 50 mana.
Duration: 20 min. Range: 50. Cast Time: 4 seconds. Cooldown: 45 min.

*You have been awarded **5,000 XP** for your new Mastery.*

TRING!

You have reached level 8! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your

choice. Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

*You have **6 Unused Characteristic Points** and **50% of Unused Skill Growth** to allocate. Now that you have progressed again, you must allocate your points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.*

*Congratulations! You have unlocked the Quest: **Unlock Your Power II**.*

Requirement: Personal Level 10.

The prompts almost brought a tear to his eye. Instead he settled for a, “Hell yeah!” Sion looked at him like he was crazy. He laughed and said, “Don’t worry. It’ll grow on you.” He calmed his excitement and reviewed his new spells. As with the *Weak Charm* spell, he suddenly just had the knowledge. He knew he could cast the spells as if he had studied them for a great period of time. That brought him to... “Futen,” Richter said loudly, “How do I teach the spells that I know?”

“Simply place your hands on the desired recipient, and will the knowledge to them. For higher level spells there may be additional requirements, but the level one spells you have learned will only require your will, and that the recipient have at least 50% affinity for that branch of magic.”

It sounded too easy. “Can anyone teach magic?” Richter asked.

“No, my lord. As you progress in skill levels, your rank progresses as

well. Levels 1-9, you are a novice. Then levels 10-24, you are an initiate; levels 25-44, an apprentice; and levels 45-69, you are awarded the rank of journeyman. After journeyman, you reach the rank of adept, and remain there until level 100. Level one hundred on, you are a master. In days past, there were stories of grandmasters, rank 150 and above, but I have never met any that I can recall. Only adepts and masters can teach spells without the use of spell books. Spell books are time consuming and costly to produce, and may require rare ingredients. Even still, only journeymen level magi and above can create them. It is obviously preferable to learn a spell directly from an adept or master. As Master of a Place of Power, you gain the abilities of a master mage despite your skill level being less than one hundred.”

“What about the 50% bonus to spell strength and resistance?”

“Each rank confers certain bonuses. It varies depending on the skill being examined, but magical ranks typically follow the same pattern. Novice rank conveys nothing. The following ranks convey a certain amount of protection and power. Initiate 5%, apprentice rank 10%, journeyman 20%, adept 35%, and master rank the 50% that you have received, my lord.

With things now much clearer, Richter turned to Sion, “Please come here, my friend.” Sion walked closer with a confused expression. “You have stood by me through death and danger. We definitely had a rocky start. You let me be eaten. I, well... I pretty much bitch slapped you in front everyone

you have ever known. Ha-ha.” Sion gave him a stone face at first, but then chuckled a bit. Richter continued, “The point is you are my best friend in this whole world, and I help my friends. I have learned Air magic. I would like to try and teach it to you.”

“Air Magic has never been the province of my people,” Sion replied with a guarded expression. “The Hearth Mother has never been able to kindle Life, Earth or Light magic in me.”

“You never know until you try, and I have never believed that someone else could tell me what I could or could not do. I won’t let my only friend in the world be told what he can’t do either, even if he’s the one doing the telling.”

Sion stared at him for a moment, “You know that barely made any sense, right?”

Richter nodded solemnly and said, “I do realize that, yes.”

They both chuckled a bit, but then Sion’s face stilled. The sprite stepped forward, closing the distance between them. He looked intently into Richter’s face as if searching for something. Richter wasn’t sure what Sion was looking for, but what he saw in his friend’s face was desperate hope. That expression led to a moment of grand realization. Sion wanted magic. Hisako had apparently tried to teach him each of the Powers associated with

the Hearth Tree, but he must have lacked affinity with all of them. It would only be natural for the son of a Master of Power to want to become a mage himself. Was Imbue Arrow the closest the sprite had come to using his mana?

Richter decided it was time to try again. Even if Air magic wouldn't work, he wouldn't rest until he helped his friend feel complete. There were three other powers affiliated with his Place of Power. If Air didn't work, he would try Dark or Water magic. Knowing instinctually exactly how to place his hands, his left went upon the sprite's head and his right went onto his friend's chest. Words came unbidden to his lips, "By the Right of My Power, I Awaken Your Power." A warmth began in Richter's chest. It reminded him of freedom, wild destruction and gentle rain. It spread from his heart and down both arms to the ends of his hands. The energy flowed into the sprite and found what could only be described as a resonance. The Power threaded through the sprite's mind and soul. Sion's eyes widened and tears cascaded down his face.

"Not Life, nor Earth, nor Light could I learn. I saw my mother's gift pass to others, but never did her magic awaken anything inside of me. I tried not to envy or hate. I tried not to let my discontent ruin the harmony of our home, but all knew," Sion's voice began to quiver with repressed emotion. He took a moment to compose himself. When he spoke again there was a certainty to his words, "I am with you for life, my lord."

*You have discovered and fulfilled the **Truest Desire** of your Companion Sion. Though he would not speak of it, long has he craved the power his mother used with abandon. Each drink of wine was somewhat bitter and every bite of meat was slightly tainted by this hidden longing. Sion will be with you through death. You are more than his ally, you are his brother!*

*Congratulations! You have gained **+300,000 Relationship Points** with **Sion**! Your relationship with your Companion Sion has improved from **Friendly (+1000)** to **Blood Brother (+250,000)**. Sion will fight with you and for you unto death, and if he can find a way back through the veil, will fight for you again.*

*Total Relationship Points with the Sion: **+312,283***

Richter was blown away by what he read. It had only made sense for him to try and help his friend. He hadn't expected such a response and certainly hadn't expected that he would be fulfilling Sion's "truest desire," whatever that meant! Slightly uncomfortable with the intense gratitude in his friend's gaze, he spoke almost pleadingly. "Sion! You are my friend. I have to put up with this 'my Lord' stuff from Futen, but not from you. I need my friend."

"I am that and more," Sion replied sticking out his arm. "I am with you through death brother." Richter returned the gesture, and they clasped

wrists, sharing a quiet moment.

“Well enough of all of that, nobody likes a sissy,” Richter said gruffly. Seeing Sion’s confused look, he realized he needed to devote some time to teaching his friend slang and swear words. They had to be at least as important as magic. “I’ll tell you later,” he said with a chuckle. He left his friend to examine his new magic. Walking up to the skeleton mage, he began to search the body.

You have received: Novice Ice Mage Robes	Defense: +2 (additional +4 vs magical attack) Durability: 14/20 Item Class: Common Quality: Average Weight: 3.7 kg.
You have found: Magic Staff	Attack: 5-10 Durability: 40/40 Item Class: Unusual Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 5.1 kg.

You have found: 2 Gold coins, 19 Silver coins and 55 Copper coins.

Looking at Futen, he held up the staff. The orb took the hint and flared white. The identified item’s information flashed into Richter’s mind.

You have found: Corrupted Staff of the Ice Wizard	Attack: 5-10 Durability: 40/40 Item Class: Unusual
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Quality: Well Crafted

Weight: 5.1 kg.

Traits: -10% Cost to Water spells.
+2% strength to Death magic. Must
have negative alignment to use.

Sion pulled out his sword, and approached the ghoul.

“What are you doing?” Richter asked.

“The ghoul’s heart is a useful potion component.”

Leaving the sprite to his gruesome task, he was about to collect the weapons from the warriors when Futen spoke. “Are you going to take the altar, my lord?”

Looking at the large black stone, he asked, “How? That thing must weigh a couple tons? And what’s it good for anyway?”

“The Magic Core of the altar has many uses. The skeletal mage was using it to focus his power. That is why it was able to resist your strikes for as long as it did. The altar was acting like a mana fount that it could tap into.”

“Well I still don’t know how to take it. It’s huge.”

“Again, it is only the core you need, my lord,” Was Futen’s tone getting a bit condescending, Richter asked himself. The remnant continued, “You have taken control of the dungeon by slaying its boss. Simply place your hand on the altar, and you will gain access to the interface.”

Putting his hand on the black altar, he was suddenly able to access the information.

Dark Altar. Lvl 1. Provides 100 mana per day.

The interface had only a few basic prompts, unlike the many options for the Mist Village. Two that caught his interest were “Access mana” and “Remove Core.”

Richter’s eyes narrowed for a moment. ‘Access mana?’ “Oh Futen? Is there a way for me to personally use the mana that the Mist Village makes? Say to power my Imbue Arrow skill? You know, so I don’t run out of mana in the middle of a fight and almost die because of it?” He finished the question with an angry rise in his voice.

“Yes, my Lord.”

Praying for patience, he asked, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Oh,” the remnant paused. “I thought that was obvious.”

He didn’t fight it this time.

“Gaaaahhhhhh!!!!!!!”

CHAPTER 17 – Day 18 – Shibon 6, 15,368 ABG



It turned out the magical core was a clockwork sphere. Through the gaps in the mechanism, red and white light shone through, and the feeling of a strong electric field was palpable when he held it. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, more like feeling static in the air. The description of the item black against a golden background. It was the first time he had seen this. The common items he had found were white, uncommon blue, unusual items were green, scarce were purple and rare prompts were framed in red. It appeared that golden items were mythic. Fingers crossed, he hoped he could figure out the colors of epic, legendary and artifact items soon.

You have found:

Magic Core

Durability: 15,000/15,000

Item Class: Mythic

Quality: Masterwork

Weight: 12,7 kg.

Traits: Magical Cores can be used to power any number of devices.

A few more questions to Futen revealed that he could access the mana generated by the Place of Power anywhere within the boundaries of his

domain, an area of over three hundred square miles. The benefits of increasing the level of his village were becoming clearer. The higher the level, the greater the reach of his magic, and the more mana he could personally access. Even with the village at level 1, the 1,000 mana available was the equivalent of investing one hundred points into Intelligence!

Excited about the possibilities, Richter loaded the ponies with the loot from their battle, and the two Companions made their way back to the village. During the journey, he invested his new characteristics points and examined both his and Sion's current status. He placed two points in Intelligence, two points into Constitution, and two more into Dexterity.

Name: Richter

Age: 24

Level: 8, 41%

Health: 160

Mana: 180

Stamina: 160

Strength: 11

Agility: 17

Dexterity: 30 (*base: 19 + items: 11*)

Constitution: 16

Endurance: 16

Intelligence: 18

Wisdom: 10

Charisma: 18

Luck: 14

Abilities:

Limitless

Gift of Tongues

Fast Learner

Skills:

Herb Lore Lvl 3; 92% to next level

Alchemy Lvl 1; 0% to next level
Analyze Lvl 1; 77% to next level
Stealth Lvl 4; 49% to next level
Archery Lvl 4; 85% to next level
 Imbue Arrow Lvl 3; 93% to next level
 Focus Lvl 1; 76% to next level
Swordsmanship Lvl 1; 73% to next level
Small Blades Lvl 1; 0% to next level
Light Armor Lvl 2; 88% to next level
Air Magic Lvl 1; 0% to next level,
Life Magic Lvl 1; 11% to next level

Marks:

Master of the Mist Village

Resistances:

Air 50%
Mental 5%
Spiritual 5%

Race: Human (Chaos Seed)

Reputation: Lvl 1 "Who are you again?"

Alignment: Neutral

Languages: Common, Sprite

Name: Sion

Age: 34

Level: 8, 71% to next level

Health: 203 **Mana:** 224 **Stamina:** 120

Strength: 17

Agility: 18

Dexterity: 46

Constitution: 16

Endurance: 12

Intelligence: 18

Wisdom: 13

Charisma: 9

Luck: 12

Abilities:

Wood Craft
Forest Concealment

Skills:

Herb lore Lvl 10, 40% to next level, 65% affinity
Alchemy Lvl 3, 31% to next level, 88% affinity
Archery Lvl 42; 22% to next level, 73% affinity
 Imbue Arrow Lvl 29, 11% to next level, 87% affinity
Focus Lvl 25, 16% to next level, 82% affinity
Tracking Lvl 12; 51% to next level, 77% affinity
Small Blades Lvl 18, 79% to next level, 73% affinity
Light Armor Lvl 24, 79% to next to next level, 81% affinity
Air Magic Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 96% affinity

Marks:

None

Resistances:

Life 10%
Earth 10%
Light 10%

Race: Wood Sprite

Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”

Alignment: +2

Languages: Sprite, Common

His friend had increased several of his skills. That was expected, but what was interesting to Richter were his affinities. If Richter remembered correctly, Sion’s affinities had been a bit higher last time he had checked his status page. If the sprite was any indication, then it appeared that for most people and creatures, as they leveled up their skills, the associated affinities decreased. It meant there was a theoretical ceiling for everyone in how far they could progress that would vary from person to person and skill to skill.

If his ability to teach Air magic was any indication, a skill could not even be learned if a person's affinity was less than 50%. Richter was finally starting to truly appreciate his ability. The potential for Limitless was, well, limitless!

The trip back to the village was uneventful, but they were thankfully able to find several more healing herbs. Upon arriving back, Richter placed the magic core in the vault. He was sure that it was worth a fortune if he sold it, but was equally sure it could greatly increase the power of his village down the road. An item that was epic class and masterwork quality had to come in handy.

The staff seemed like it could be powerful in the right hands, but the corruption severely limited its usefulness. Richter really didn't understand the importance of alignment yet. It was easy to think that negative was bad and positive was good, but he had a feeling it was more nuanced. Sion was positive alignment, but his people had shoot-on-sight orders for anyone in their territory. Not exactly a cute and cuddly policy. Despite being unsure of what it all meant, he still wasn't in a rush to let the staff fall into the hands of a creature of negative alignment. Maybe he could purify it though.

"Futen, can the corruption on this staff be removed?"

"Yes, my lord. Either Light or Life magic can be used to remove corruption. One of the few forms of magic available at Level 1 of the village

is curse removal. The cost is 200 mana. Would you like to use it?”

“Yes, do it. No, wait! I will do it myself.”

“Very well, my lord. The spell will have a higher likelihood of success if you cast it in the room with the Great Seal.”

“Why?” Richter asked, curious.

“Just as the village is the physical manifestation of your Place of Power, the Great Seal is the physical representation of the ley lines which comprise it. That is why it has the strength to keep monsters of the catacombs at bay. Though your domain extends beyond this village as we discussed, your ability to access your Powers will always be greatest at the core.”

Richter nodded, then climbed the small hill that led to the Great Seal. When he got there, he was somewhat surprised. The mosaic had changed. At least part of it had. The clear spiral that was set in the floor had changed from tiles to a solid piece of crystal. It was now shining a faint yellow light. The other three arms remained the same. It appeared that when Richter had claimed his power, it had awakened part of the design. He felt a faint thrum in the room that had not been there previously. He walked to the center of the Great Seal. A quick check showed that most of the mana from casting *Confusing Mist* had been regenerated. He then found the proper spell under the village interface and cast it.

Motes of light began to fill the chamber they were standing in. They coalesced around the staff, and when they disappeared, the black stains that had been present at the end were gone. It was also the clear blue of arctic ice now, rather than the opaque blue it had been before. Examining it again, he found it had increased in strength.

You have found: Staff of the Ice Wizard	Attack: 5-10 Durability: 40/40 Item Class: Unusual Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 5.1 kg. Traits: -10% Cost to Water spells.
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He checked his status page again, and saw that his progression in Life Magic had progressed from 11% to 49% just by casting one high level spell. Just another little perk of being a Master, he supposed. Gotta love it when you can power level.

Sure that the staff would come in handy, Richter packed it on the ponies. He also loaded them with the better weapons they had found so far. Counting the coins from the chest that had been in the treasury, he found fifty-five gold coins, two hundred and fifteen silver, and one hundred and seventy-four copper. Unfortunately, he had no idea if he was a wealthy man or a pauper. Even though in the game a copper had equaled one dollar, Richter couldn't trust that the conversion held true. A loaf of bread could be

worth a gold coin for all he knew. Sion was no help in this. The wood sprites had a clearly xenophobic attitude, and didn't mingle with the humans of the neighboring kingdom. Richter would just have to figure it out on the way.

One thing was clear; it was time to grow his village, and that meant getting help. Even though he was chomping at the bit to unlock more of his Powers, the next quest required that he be at least two levels higher. Presumably the subsequent quests would have level requirements as well. Waiting around just wasn't his style. He needed to travel into the Kingdom of Yves to find people that would settle in his village.

Richter instructed Futen to continue collecting resources for when he returned. The remnant surprisingly took some initiative, and told Richter about a nearby quarry that had provided the stone for the village in the past. There were several tasks Richter wanted Futen to attend to: quarrying the stone, harvesting iron from the mine, widening and deepening the trench surrounding the village and clearing trees for two hundred yards around its borders. Warning the remnant to always leave enough mana to pay the *Confusing Mist* upkeep, he and Sion turned to leave. Futen gave his customary, "Yes, my Lord," and that was that.

The next day, Richter and Sion started on their journey through the forest. The basic plan was to follow Hisako's directions and head west until they reached the edge of the forest. Using Tommy Lee Jones' math, a fugitive

could move over uneven terrain at four mph. That fugitive was obviously not going through mountainous terrain and virgin forest. Even though they walked a solid twelve to fourteen hours a day, there was no way they traveled more than twenty-five to thirty-five miles before they rested for the night. Of course that didn't factor in having to backtrack around obstructions, their slowed pace with the ponies, or the most important issue: neither Richter nor Sion was as badass as the man that played Indiana Jones and Han Solo.

Sion didn't understand Richter's obsession with distances or hurrying. For the first few hours it frustrated Richter to no end. The laissez faire attitude of the wood sprite was so... un-American. After that ridiculous thought, Richter realized that maybe he was being a bit silly, and with a small laugh at himself, relaxed and decided to enjoy the journey.

They moved beyond the borders of the mist during the first day, and had no issues until the second night. A pack of wolves was seen that evening. They made camp early and built the fire high. The wolves started approaching, but lost interest after a sizeable portion of the lead wolf was turned into bloody chunks by Sion's imbued arrow. While not able to salvage the pelt, that night Richter discovered that wolf meat was quite tasty, despite being gamier than what he was used to. They were able to kill several rabbits, foxes and one small brown bear during their trip. They only hunted at the end of each day though, when they had time to skin the animals and dry the pelts

over a low fire.

The first few days they traveled along the small river that flowed by the village. It rejoined the larger river that Richter had followed upon arriving in The Land, and they continued west. In addition to hunting, they practiced their *Weak Haste* spell as often as they could, hoping to advance their skill. They both increased their Air magic by one level, Richter slightly ahead of Sion. The Herb Lore skill also increased for both of them gradually as they picked useful plants along their journey.

About a week into the journey, Sion suddenly motioned for him to lower himself to the ground. Tying up the ponies, they moved at a slow crawl to look over a drop-off in front of them. Just about fifteen feet away from the lip of the small cliff was a ten-foot tall, green humanoid eating a stag. It didn't show any squeamishness as it reached into the animal's body. Its oversized hands were tipped with thick, black claws, and it pulled meat and viscera indiscriminately into its maw. The jaw must have been able to dislocate like a snake's because it shoved almost an entire leg into its mouth before chewing loudly. The sound of snapping bones put Richter's teeth on edge. He used *Analyze* on it.

Mountain Troll, Lvl 22. Health: 1100/1100, Mana 0/0, Stamina 520/520.

Richter's face froze into a twisted expression as if he had eaten something sour. Making eye contact with Sion, he motioned sharply with his head for them to leave. Sion's face adopted a perfect, 'What the hell did you think we were going to do' expression and nodded back. With slow, deliberate moves, they eased back from the edge on their stomachs and then collected their mounts. They backtracked a good half an hour before setting on a path that would take them well wide of the creature. Sion later told him about the troll. The creatures were apparently brutally strong and fast. They were aggressive almost to the point of insanity and were driven solely by the desire to feed. Worst though, was that they regenerated so fast that even massive wounds didn't slow them. Without dismembering it and then lighting it on fire, it would not stop until it had eaten you, most likely alive.

Though the troll was the greatest threat they came upon, it was not the only one. A few days later, while taking a break to eat, Sion was ranging around the campsite. It was something he had a tendency to do. Richter wasn't sure if constant movement was something endemic to the wood sprites or if Sion just had a bad case of ADHD. Whichever was the case, his friend would often scout in small circles around any area they paused at or stopped at for the night. This time Sion came back to the camp excited. "I need some time to do something. It might take a bit, is that alright?"

After Richter's nod, he pulled out his mortar and pestle and started

grinding. Richter didn't recognize the herbs, but they combined to make a greyish red paste. Sion scrapped it onto a piece of bark he cut from a nearby tree, being careful not to get it onto his skin. He left camp again with no explanation, moving quickly back the way he had come.

Bemused but not concerned, Richter simply continued to relax. It was nice taking a bit of a longer break. Walking for days on end was not as glamorous or restful as it might seem. He laid on his back with his pack as a pillow, and looked up at the forest canopy and the snatches of blue sky that could be seen between the leaves. About twenty minutes later, Sion came back smiling broadly and said, "I found something. Come with me, I'll need your help."

Richter got to his feet, "Where are we going?"

"Just come, and leave the ponies. They will be safer here."

Not exactly sure what he meant by 'safer,' Richter just shrugged and did as he was asked. The two of them walked two hundred yards from where they had been eating. Sion stopped walking and pointed to a large dead tree. The trunk was about three meters wide and six meters high. The top was jagged and irregular, clearly only the base of a once much larger tree. There was a large hole at the bottom of the trunk leading down into the earth. The opening was about three feet tall. Richter could probably make his way into

it, but it would be tight.

“Okay great. An old dead tree. Is it a long lost relative?”

Sion huffed in irritation, “No, *gyoti*!” (The translation was something like ‘irritating fool’ as best as Richter could make out with his Gift of Tongues ability) “This was an Offshoot. It was the beginning of a Hearth Tree long ago. Something obviously happened.” Sion picked up the bark with the grey-red paste on it, and tossed it down the hole.

“But the Hearth Tree is huge,” Richter protested. “This thing is a toothpick in comparison.”

“That’s because our Hearth Tree is built on a Place of Power. Normally Hearth Trees are just the center of a wood sprite community, though sprites may live within if it gets big enough.”

“So finding this is like finding a piece of your history,” Richter asked. History had never really been his strong point. He still shuddered when he thought about the historical tours his grandmother would drag him on. At some point people just need to admit that looking at old homes in Gatlinburg was not that great.

“Yes, it is,” Sion said with his previous excitement. He either did not pick up on or decided to ignore Richter’s nonplussed tone. And why not, he was just talking to a *gyoti* after all. “More important though is that the Seed

Core might still be viable.”

Richter just looked at him.

Sion peered at Richter from the corner of his eye, then looked back at the tree, then peered again this time with a small turn of his head, then looked back at the tree. This continued for a good five minutes, with Richter just staring at the sprite. The human’s stubborn resistance finally won out.

“Do you know what that means?” Sion asked, exasperated.

“You know that I don’t. You knew before you said it that I didn’t know what a Seed Core was. You could have just called it a mystical booty scratcher. I still wouldn’t know. Just tell me.”

“Fine! You humans are so cranky and impatient. A Seed Core...,” Sion paused for a moment, Richter was sure just to mess with him, “is how you make a Hearth Tree, a Guardian Wood or a host of other magical trees. One of the sacred duties of my people is to further the cause of good by growing magical trees for the betterment of all.”

“Oh, so it’s like a stem cell?”

Sion looked at him, confused.

Richter gave his best sarcastic grin, “Not so fun when someone drops a term you don’t know, is it?” Changing his expression to one of gracious forbearance, he said, “You may continue.”

Grinding his teeth, Sion said, “The point is, the Hearth Tree only makes a Seed Core once every few hundred years, if that. If the Core is still viable, it will be a wonderful boon.”

“This tree looks like it has been dead for a long time, Sion. Why would you think that this Seed Core thing wasn’t dead too?”

“The Core is a source of great magical power. It gives to nature, but also is maintained by it. As long as its power is not drawn upon too much, or too fast, it can sustain itself almost indefinitely.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sold,” Richter said. “How do we check?”

“We simply need to go down into the bowels of the tree, and see if we can find it. I should be able to feel a resonance if I am close enough. It will be a round sphere about yea big,” Sion held his hands apart showing something the size of a grapefruit.

“Okay, that won’t take long. Let’s do it,” Richter said.

Sion looked at him a moment opening his mouth to speak, and then closing it again, looking indecisive.

“What is it?” Richter asked.

“Well, from the stories I have heard, if a Seed Core is ever left out for a long period of time, it has the tendency to attract monsters. The healing and regenerative properties of the Core can be used to make the monsters

stronger, more resilient, or... bigger.”

“What do you mean exactly by bigger?”

“Just that. The elders told stories of giant ants or snakes. I’m sure that they were exaggerating. Besides, we don’t need to worry about that here.”

“Phew. For a second I thought we were going to be overrun with flesh-eating beetles or something,” Richter said with a small laugh. He had never really been a big fan of bugs.

The sprite laughed in return. “No, no. There are no flesh-eating beetles in the Forest of Nadria.” There was a short pause, “What we DO have is a vicious animal called a skeeling. It’s usually only about the size of a badger. It is completely blind, but has excellent hearing. It’s subterranean, and they normally do not wander to the surface. The animal has ridged scales and a very distinctive smell. They have been known to burrow under trees and eat the roots, killing the tree. You can understand that it is a pest we try to get rid of whenever we can.”

Richter nodded along. He thought it was remarkable that Sion had so much information about this one specific forest creature, but he also wondered why he was focusing so much on it.

The sprite continued, “Now skeelings are mean and fast. They have two rows of sharp teeth that can tear through an animal in seconds. Luckily,

they hate the extract of red vine mixed with iron leaf. It's bad enough that it drives them out of their holes and above ground. Then they are much easier to kill. Now when I was wandering earlier, I found this." He tossed a flat palm-sized rock to Richter. "I didn't know what it was at first. It had ridges like a skeeling scale, but was way too big. Most scales on adult male skeelings are about the size of your thumbnail. Are you following me so far?"

Richter nodded again, starting to feel uneasy about story time.

"Well, now that I have found this old Hearth Tree, it makes sense that a skeeling might have made its home underneath."

"Okayyy. So you want to drive it out from underneath the tree?"

"Yes. As I said, it would only take a mixture of red vine and iron leaf. We toss it down the hole and the skeeling is so angry it comes to the surface. Then we can kill it and look for the Seed Core."

"Sion," Richter said quietly, "does red vine and iron leaf make a greyish red paste when you mix them?"

"It does," the sprite said in an innocent voice with a smile on his face.

"Would you want to avoid getting it on your skin?"

"Oh yes, it causes horrible itching," the sprite replied. "That's why it's best to keep it in a container or on something like a bark plate."

“Hmmm,” Richter said. “And if you were to throw something like that mixture down a hole, how long would it take for the skeeling to react.”

“Hmmm,” Sion replied. “That is actually a fascinating topic. Now that you ask, it would depend on time of day. Skeelings are nocturnal. If it were to be exposed to red vine and iron leaf at night, it would go into an immediate rage. If, however, it were to smell the mixture during the daytime-”

“Like now you mean?” Richter interjected.

“Yes, Richter, like now. Well in that case, it might take a few minutes to wake it up, but I can promise you it would be EXTRA furious when it did.”

“So it might take, almost exactly the amount of time it took you to relate all of this information?”

“About that amount of time, yes Richter,” Sion replied.

Losing patience Richter asked, “Okay, so what do we do after it comes up?”

“Well,” Sion replied with an evil grin, “depending on your perspective, this is the easiest part. Just run and I’ll kill it before it eats you.”

The ground in front of the tree exploded upward, and a shrill screech filled the air.

The skeeling was NOT the size of a badger. The thing was the size of a brown bear. It had an armored carapace like an armadillo. The four legs of the creature ended in three-fingered paws. Each finger was tipped with a wicked black talon, arched slightly inward towards the palm. It was off-white in color and its face resembled a rodent of some kind. The eyelids were closed, and two large triangular ears stuck straight up from its head. The snout was rat-like, but when it threw back its head and shrieked, the teeth were flat and tapered to be sharp at the bottom.

“Run!” Sion shouted. The sprite had begun imbuing an arrow as soon as the creature appeared. He struck it in the side, and the arrow impacted with its customary boom. The skeeling fell, knocking over a small tree, but got back up quickly. The arrow hadn’t pierced its hide!

“This might be a problem,” the sprite called out.

As the skeeling began running towards them, attracted by the sound of their voices, Richter looked over and shouted, “You think?”

“Move!”

The sprite jumped up into the tree he had been standing underneath. Richter didn’t waste time firing an arrow, but cast *Weak Haste* on himself instead. Then he enacted the second phase of his master plan, he ran his butt off.

Weak Haste let him keep ahead of the monster that was clearly attracted to his footsteps. Not by very much, however. Sion rained down shots on the creature which slowed it down, but did little damage against its armored hide. As Richter ran for his life, he realized his current situation was probably due to poor communication. He was all for taking initiative, and pursuing one's own personal bliss, but Sion could have given him a better heads up. He really needed to have a discussion with the sprite and teach him that communication was the foundation for any true friendship. Then maybe in the future, he could avoid narrowly being eaten by a horrible albino rat monster. Of course, maybe all of this was happening because Sion was just a dick and needed him to act like bait...

“Ahhh, ahhhhhh!” Richter screamed. The tip of the skeeling's claws had caught him on the back and disrupted his reflective train of thought. Most of the damage was blocked by his armor, but blood freely flowed down from his right shoulder. He put on a burst of extra speed to add some distance between himself and the monster.

The running and dodging had taken them exactly opposite in the small clearing to the tree that Sion was hiding in. The sprite was imbuing his arrow for another strike. Richter began running at the tree and counted the seconds that he saw the aura. Four, five, six, seven, eight, the blue aura was blinding. The churning of earth and heavy pad falls of the skeeling could be heard

getting closer behind Richter. At a distance of only ten yards, Richter dove forward and a split second later Sion released.

Richter landed badly, wrenching his ankle. He rolled over and drew his short sword. Hopefully he could at least wound the creature and drive it off. He REALLY did not want to be eaten again.

He was worrying for nothing though. The last arrow had connected. Whereas strikes to the beast's body had failed to produce an effect, Sion's overpowered shot to the skeeling's face made it nose dive into the ground. It's body created a furrow in the ground ten feet long. It lay motionless for a few moments, and then lifted its head to screech again in rage and defiance. Richter had not wasted time though. He hobbled forward, arm held low and cocked, then rammed his blade into the creature's eye. A faint pop could be felt up his sword arm as he penetrated the eye, followed quickly by the crunch of facial bones and then a meaty resistance as his blade entered grey matter. Without even a death cry, the skeeling's head became dead weight, and Richter withdrew his weapon to the sound of further grating of bones. He looked up at the sprite's triumphant face, and communicated what was in his heart.

“You're an asshole.”

His Companion lightly dropped down, and did not deign to address

Richter's assertion. The sprite merely slapped him good naturedly on the back as he walked past to the skeeling's body. Sion looked up at his friend and said, "Good job! I couldn't have done it without you." The grin had not left the sprite's face.

Richter shook his head, and repeated silently to himself, This is what happens when you have poor communication. He resolved to make more of an effort to engage his friend in the future, specifically about his sick sense of humor. Sion had not stopped looking at the creature, and was walking around it now, marveling at its size. After two complete laps, he looked back and said, "Now let us see what we have got."

Richter took a healing herb out of his pack and started munching on it. He barely noticed the slightly bitter taste anymore. Honestly it wasn't any worse than some of those fru-fru salads that were so popular back on Earth. He walked along behind Sion, and reflected it was strange that he didn't really miss his old life. The action, adventure, danger and reward he had found in the Land resonated with something inside of him. True, he missed his family and friends. He would also kill for a chicken biscuit. Here though, he felt like he had... purpose. Even running from the skeeling was more satisfying, and exciting, than almost anything that had happened to him back on Earth. This was where he belonged. He had also leveled his Light Armor skill which was nothing to sneeze at.

Sion had reached the tree, oblivious to Richter's introspective thoughts. The wood sprite immediately began lowering himself down into the hole. Pushing his musings aside for another time, Richter took his pack off, leaving it at the entrance to the tree and climbed down as well. The space was actually reasonably large, for a subterranean gopher hole that is. A phosphorescent blue moss gave off a faint illumination. The ceiling was about four and a half feet from the floor, so while he couldn't stand upright, he could move along at a reasonably comfortable crouch. The small area they were in couldn't have been more than forty square feet, but in front of them was another large hole leading downward at a gentle slope. Sion's sword was out, and he moved forward warily.

They dropped down to the second level. It was a larger cavern about twenty yards across and thirty yards deep. There was nothing living, but the floor was littered with hundreds of bones. Many seemed animal-like, but more than a few were the long bones or skulls of humanoids. This thing had been preying on passersby for quite a while. The stench was also a bit overpowering as it had placed its waste wherever it wanted. Richter tried not to think too much about the overly soft earth or the fact that his shoes sank several inches into the ground.

Sion moved to the center of the room. He closed his eyes and held both arms out to his side. He stood like that for over a minute, and then

walked with certainty to the back of the cavern. He started digging in the ground with his bare hands, throwing clods of dirt to the side. Sighing, Richter thought, in for a penny in for a pound. He knelt beside his friend and began digging as well. He was sure that the stench was permanently sinking into his skin. After digging for three feet however, a smell began to compete with the offal. The new scent was like clean earth.

A memory came to Richter's mind. He was standing in the park with an old girlfriend. They had stood under a willow, the branches reaching almost to the ground, and around them a seriously intense rainstorm had let loose its fury. Only a few drops had made their way through the canopy to fall on the two of them, and they had just stood there in silence. It was the last time they had touched. After that day, the inevitable arguments of youth had broken them apart. Even though it was a bittersweet memory, Richter had always still cherished it. The faint, clean smell of rain on grass was somehow the same as what he was experiencing now.

Richter shook his head, clearing his mind. Sion was standing in front of him, holding a brown sphere with light green veins running across the surface. The veins glowed with a gentle light. Sion was smiling, "I don't know what you were thinking, but I know it was a reassuring memory of nature. That is what the Seed Core truly is. It is the potential for something wonderful. I know I was cavalier earlier, and should have told you what I had

planned. I was excited to find an Offshoot, and possibly find a Seed Core. More than that though, I could not let such a wonderful talisman of good be used to feed the power of whatever evil creature had found it. Thank you for helping me, my friend.”

Richter was moved by the sprite’s sincerity. He told him, “I’m here for you man. I will fight beside you, and what is important to you is important to me.” Sion smiled in appreciation. “But you’re still an asshole, buddy,” Richter finished. Sion’s smile grew wider, and he gave a small laugh.

“Well, now we are even for the goblin pot. Now touch the Seed Core, and get your reward, my friend,” the sprite said.

With a smile and a confused cock of his head, Richter reached out and laid his hand on the brown sphere. The light from the green veins pulsed, and a prompt filled his vision.

You have found:
Seed Core

Herb Class: Rare.

Possible Uses: This can be planted to grow almost any type of tree. It will grow into whatever best fits the needs of the region.

Another prompt appeared in his vision right afterward.

*You have been offered a Quest: **Tree of Power I**. The Seed Core is a pure*

form of life. Though not sentient, it can communicate on a basic level with creatures of neutral or positive alignment. It is calling to you. Will you plant the Seed Core in a safe area? Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?

Well this was a no brainer. Even if Sion wasn't cuckoo for this thing, it seemed like a good cause anyway. He selected 'Yes'.

*Quest Update: **Tree of Power I!** As Master of a Place of Power you have the chance to grow a high level tree if you plant the Seed Core within the boundaries of your domain!*

Another exciting opportunity for his village! In addition to the Seed Core there were other items at the back of the cavern, many buried just below the surface. They spent the next hour searching and found a multitude of packs and weapons. The faint light from the moss and Seed Core was not enough to truly inspect the items. The stench was also growing unbearable, so they dragged everything they had found back with them to the surface. The first taste of clean air was a relief.

They set the items they had found to the side and just sat breathing fresh air for a few minutes. A thought intruded on Richter's recovery time. "Will Hisako be okay if I plant the Seed Core at the village? If it takes centuries for a Hearth Tree to make one, then she might want it back."

Sion shook his head, "The Seed Core was found by us. The Forest

obviously wanted it to be part of our destiny. I believe in you, Richter. Just use it for good. Now,” Sion said, “one last task. Skeeling armor is usually resilient, but that monster was something else. I say we skin it and see if anything useful can be made.”

“Of course, my friend, of course,” Richter said with a smile. “But after that, we HAVE to take a bath in the river.”

CHAPTER 18 – Day 34 – Shibon 22, 15,368 ABG



It took over two weeks to reach the edge of the forest. No other major events occurred after they found the Seed Core, and they were able to enjoy the peace of the journey. Many of the items they had found in the skeeling's lair were rubbish: old moldy clothes and rusty tools. There were several pouches adding up to a few gold coins. One item did stand out though.

<p>You have found: High Steel Long Sword</p>	<p>Attack: 14-20 Durability: 37/50 Item Class: Common Quality: Superb Weight: 2.8 kg.</p>
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Well, it wasn't a magical sword of griffin reaping or anything spectacular, but it was a definite step up from his short sword, which was looking rather battered anyway.

Leaving the trees was a bit of a shock to the senses. After weeks of shade, and the myriad sounds of the small creatures around them, they were confronted with cultivated land. It was strange to see the wide open sky after so much time in the forest. Before them was an ocean of green grass on

gently sloping hills. The sky was cloudless, and was a smooth azure like cornflowers in spring. A broad dirt road was several hundred yards from the edge of the forest. The travelers upon it raised a cloud of dust ten feet in the air. There was some traffic in both directions on it, but the majority was moving south towards a town seen in the distance. Sion and Richter approached the road, and a quick round of questioning informed them that the road to Law passed through the town. They joined the flow of traffic towards the settlement.

After only a few minutes, the dirt in the air found its way into their mouths. Can't even get away from pollution in medieval times, Richter thought with irritation. The time spent traveling on the road was unpleasant to say the least. Before too long though, the town loomed in front of them. A stone wall surrounded it, fifteen feet high, with towers at each corner. The town gates were wide open, and two bored looking guards merely waved traffic through. Until Richter and Sion that is.

"Papers," the older guard said without changing his demeanor, his hand outstretched.

Richter stared at him without speaking.

Letting out a long suffering sigh, the guard repeated himself, "Papers."

Richter put on a fake smile, “I’m sorry, but I didn’t know we needed papers. I didn’t see anyone in front of us hand you anything.”

“YOU don’t need anything, but the spit there does,” the younger guard said in an aggressive tone. Sion breathed heavily in irritation.

“Stay easy, Jonsey, no need to get agitated,” the other guard said. “Now where did you folks come from?”

“We just finished traveling through the forest.”

“Came from Rione did you?”

Richter thought quickly, and remembered that Rione was a neighboring kingdom on the other side of the Serrated Mountains. If his recall was correct from the game, the Kingdom of Rione was less developed, and had large populations of nonhumans.

“Err yeah, we crossed through a pass in the mountains and then traveled down through the forest. Your town is the first that we have seen.”

“Failure to declare at the borders is an offence and requires you to be detained.” Jonsey’s voice was full of righteous indignation, but it was clear that the main source of his ire was Sion. His glare never left the small humanoid.

“Whoa, whoa, Jonsey! I told you to be calm.” A note of iron had worked its way into the older guard’s voice. Turning to Richter he said,

“Now you seem like a good sort. I’m sure you didn’t mean to flout the King’s laws, now did you?”

The answer was obvious, so as sincerely as possible Richter answered, “No! Of course not.”

“Now I have a cousin that works at the border, and if you wanted to leave the passage fee with me I’m sure I could get it to him. No harm, no foul.” As the guard said it, he looked Richter meaningfully in the eye.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Richter replied. “Of course, I would feel better if I could offer a bit of coin to pay for the cost of the journey.”

The guard smiled brightly, “Well if it makes you feel better, who am I to object?”

Not knowing what amount was appropriate he took three silver from his purse and paused a moment. The expectant look on the guard’s face made him dig a bit deeper, and he pulled out five more. At a pleased nod from the guard, Richter closed his purse and handed over the coins. For an older man, the guard made the coins disappear fast enough. The liveried man waved the two Companions through. As they passed, he handed them a piece of paper he had scribbled on. “Take this to the ministry office and get a bond for your friend there,” nodding at Sion. “You will continue to run into trouble without

the right papers. Just keep straight on the main street until you see a large, white building with a green slate roof on the right.”

Nodding thanks to the man, Richter took the paper and began to turn away, but on impulse moved back to the gate. At the guard’s curious glance, he took another five silver out of his purse and said, “It is clear that we are new here, and I would appreciate any help navigating your town and country. I would be very appreciative,” he said, shaking the money in his partially closed fist, the coins making a slight tinkling sound.

“Well I have always fancied myself an ambassador,” the guard chuckled, taking the coins and making them disappear just as quickly as the first eight. “When you get to the ministry, ask for Edwin. Tell him Caulder sent you. It might also be a good idea to tell them you lost the papers, rather than that you didn’t declare your friend upon entering our fair land. Just a piece of friendly advice, ey? And if you need a place to stay I would recommend the Whistling Hen. They may not be the cheapest, but for a copper the stable boy will pay close attention to your horses. Make sure they don’t wander off in the night, if you catch my meaning. They also don’t mind if you have friends from various places,” he said, nodding at Sion again.

“Thank you for your help. My name is Richter,” he said extending his hand.

Caulder extended his own and they clasped wrists. The guard's hand was rough with calluses. "You might want to find some clothes as well," indicating the green armor they both wore. "You kind of stand out. Maybe I'll see you in the common room later, and we can share an ale. The Whistling Hen has great service," he said with a laugh, "and either way, welcome to Leaf's Crossing."

Somewhat confused, but happy for the advice, Richter simply nodded and smiled. Even though it had cost some money to enter the town, it seemed his increased Charisma was already coming in handy. With a slight pull on the bridle, his pony started walking again, Sion and his own pony moving along beside him. Throughout the exchange, the younger guard had stared coldly at the sprite.

After they had moved up the road for a few minutes, Richter asked, "Why did he call you that?"

Sion took a moment before answering, "I had always heard stories that some humans harbored a hate for us and other races, but I had hoped it wasn't true. What he called me was an insult. I have never heard about needing to register before though. From the stories older sprites have told, the city of Law has many races within it."

Richter felt somewhat disheartened. He had hoped that blind hatred

wouldn't follow him to this world. It seemed some things were universal, however. They walked for a while until they came upon a white building with a green roof, just as Caulder had said. A coat of arms, blue swords pointing downward on a field of green, was hung at the top of the building, the same image Richter had seen on the guards' shirts.

A copper coin each to the valet ensured that their mounts would be watched while they were inside. The entrance led into a large room with multiple hallways leading off of it. People moved quickly in all directions. Lines of various colors were on the floor, some tracing into open doorways and others leading off into the distance. Seeing that all of the lines converged at the desk at the far end of the room, he joined the queue of people waiting. First racial prejudice and now the DMV. So far Richter wasn't a fan of the Kingdom.

After an hour of standing in line, they reached the front. A severe older woman looked down at them from an elevated platform. A large wooden desk was between them. Her hair was in a gray bun, and her mouth seemed set into a perpetual frown. She sneered slightly when she spoke to them.

"Yes?" she asked in a scratchy voice that would put a pack a day smoker to shame.

Richter plastered a smile onto his face, “Hello, ma’am, I was told by the city guard that I needed to get papers for my Companion,” nodding to Sion.

Apparently his increased Charisma was powerless in the face of entrenched bureaucracy. Pinning Richter to the floor with her gaze, the woman rasped out, “Failure to declare a nonhuman upon entering Yves is a serious offence.”

“No, no,” Richter said quickly. “We simply lost our papers. I have this note.” He handed her the paper that Caulder had given him.

With disdain, the woman slowly took the paper and scanned it. Flicking her gaze back and forth between Richter and Sion, she grunted as she read. With one last long look at them, as if to question why the world had to have such imbeciles in it, she took out a piece of paper from a stack on her left and jotted down a quick set of notes. “Take this to requisition processing and get a note of dividend. Then take the note to accounting, and pay the requisite fee. They will give you an AIY-6 form. Have that signed by middle registry, and return the form back to this desk after obtaining the signatures of three people in good standing within the town. At that point...”

As she rattled off these directions with the sure tone of a general giving commands on the battlefield, Richter began to wail internally. His

panic ratcheted up with each new mini quest he was being given. Even Sion, who had faced a horde of goblins and an undead sorcerer, paled under her onslaught. With the feeling of a man without air, Richter made one last effort to keep the two of them from being drowned in a week of bureaucracy, “I need to talk to Edwin,” he blurted.

“Ohhh,” she said slowly, dragging the single syllable out until the sound turned into a question. Richter was fairly certain she was doing her best to make him catch fire with her mind. After a seeming eternity she said, “Follow the blue and white dashed line to the second floor.” The woman’s voice was like two rocks scraping together... coarse rocks.

Saying thank you, Richter and Sion walked, walked rather quickly truth be told, away from the fearsome creature. After only a moment of searching, they found the appropriate line and followed it to the second floor. It led to a door with “Nonhuman Affairs” carved above it. It might have taken days to get here if he had followed the proper channels. Richter realized that the money he had given to Caulder was probably the best money he had ever spent in either world. Whether the interaction was due to his Charisma or Luck he’d never know, but he was thankful. Knocking on the door, they swiftly heard something crash against the other side of it and a voice shouted, “Go away!” Richter hoped he hadn’t spoken too soon.

With the only other option being to go back down stairs and face

Edna the Terrible, Richter steeled himself and went inside the room. A portly man sat behind a desk piled with papers. His robe hung open revealing a simple white shirt and brown pants. The shirt had several stains upon it, and by the fade pattern, they had been accumulated over some time. The man looked up from whatever he was working on and snarled, "I said I was busy. Who are you anyway? Do I need to call the guards?" The greasy civil servant opened his mouth and drew in a sharp breath.

Before Edwin could call for help, a call that could land Sion and he in jail, Richter said, "Caulder sent us. He said you could help."

"Caulder? That no good sunuvabitch. He still owes me from that game of Kings last week. And you thought you would engender sympathy by using his name? Ha! Guar--"

"He sent us to give you the money he owes you," Sion interrupted loudly.

"He did?" Edwin asked, sounding confused.

"He did?" Richter echoed, sounding confused himself.

Sion widened his eyes, set his mouth and indicated Edwin with a not so subtle head movement.

Richter looked back at Edwin, whose mouth was still open as if he was undecided whether to finish his outcry. Taking what seemed like his

three hundred and fifty thousandth sigh since coming to The Land, Richter squared his shoulders, and more definitively said, “He did.”

A large grin landed upon the face of the government official, “Well now. That changes everything, my friends. So you have my three gold pieces with you then?”

Never trusting a smile, Richter narrowed his eyes. Plastering a large smile of his own on, he said, “Of course! It would be great if we could finish here quickly because we need to drop off our bounties.”

“Bounties?” Edwin asked, his smile slipping a bit.

“Yes,” Richter said, his own smile widening. “They are really beginning to stink. Taking only dead-on-delivery contracts can surely make things easier, but it’s hard on the nose when they start to pile up. You have to bring the whole body back now too. So much easier when they only needed the head. Isn’t that right, Sion?” The sprite stood at back of the room caressing the hilt of his sword. Upon hearing his name, the sprite just gave an evil smile that did not reach his eyes. Shaking his head as if to mourn the loss of a simpler time, Richter reached for his purse to pull out the money and said innocently, “You did say three gold pieces?”

During his soliloquy, Edwin’s eyes had widened until it seemed the man’s bushy eyebrows would fly off the top of his head, “Well, well, that is

to say, I think I confused Caulder with another fellow... Kwalder. Yes I remember now, Caulder only owed me seven silver and five coppers.”

“Hmm, well that would be an easy mistake to make,” Richter said with a smile. Counting out the required funds he placed them in Edwin’s sweaty palm. “Now we are all friends. We have done you a favor by helping you collect on a debt. What are friends for if not favors though, right? Perhaps you could help us as well. We apparently need papers so that my Companion can travel through the kingdom.”

Nodding quickly, Edwin moved to get out various documents and stamps. As he started to get their paperwork in order, Richter said “While we are here, maybe you can tell me why we need to have papers at all. It also might be nice to have a reference for someone in government over in Law. We like making friends. I’m a people person, right Sion?” A grim chuckle was his only answer.

With another look at the seemingly bloodthirsty sprite with his ever-so-sharp sword, Edwin started to nod even faster as he continued his task.

A short while later, the two friends were walking down the street and laughing. They found directions to the Whistling Hen easily enough. For some reason the man who gave him directions winked like Caulder had. Still not getting the joke, he and Sion just thanked him and strolled to the inn. A

red hen was on the sign with its beaked pursed and musical notes coming out.

As they walked inside they were greeted with a wave of sound. Time had been moving on, and the interior of the inn was swollen with customers for dinner. A musician played some kind of stringed instrument, and several patrons clapped along. A large black pot hung over a fire and a hearty aroma of vegetables and simmering meat permeated the air. There was definitely a stale beer smell in the air as well, but it was a lot better than some bars Richter had been in. It seemed like everyone was having a good time.

More interesting, there was a mix of races in the inn. Though it was mostly humans by far, there was a table of dwarves near the center of the room. He couldn't be sure of course having never seen one before, but the short frame, large muscles and beards seemed like a clear giveaway. At another table there was a taller woman with slightly pointed ears laughing at the joke of one of her human table companions. This was the world he had dreamed of. A world of fantasy melded with a world of hope and joy. And that feeling of contentment lasted right up to the moment that Sion drew an arrow with a snarl and aimed his bow across the room.

The mood changed as first one, then another, and then all of the people in the room stood and drew whatever weapons they had available. A few only managed to fall on their face, clearly deep in their cups. Richter had his hand on his sword confused as he did not see any danger. He traced the

line of the Sion's arrow and finally saw the target of his friend's ire. A brown tunic covered a goblin the size of a scout. It ('He' Richter mentally corrected remembering Hisako's advice) was squealing in terror as he pressed his back against the bar, seeking escape.

"Lower that bow!" a voice shouted. A large woman came from behind the bar holding a rolling pin. "If that arrow leaves your bow, we will rip you apart!" She put herself in the path of Sion's shot.

"Sion, put down your bow," Richter said. "We are guests here. Do not let your hate guide you. Is this what the Hearth Mother would want?"

Sion glanced at him sharply, then relieved tension on his bow string. He shoved his arrow back into his quiver in a smooth, but angry, motion.

"Now get out," the woman spat.

Richter raised his hands in appeasement. "I am so sorry that we have disrupted the love and peace of this place. What you have here is amazing. My Companion and I have had a hard time. We have fought through many dangers, and barely survived against a band of goblins that were trying to corrupt his home."

"That is no excuse!"

"No it is not, miss. I won't give you an excuse. My dad used to say, excuses are monuments of nothing that build bridges to nowhere. I'm just a

man who wants to offer an apology.” Richter reached under his armor for a hidden pouch. Opening it, he fished inside and then withdrew an opal. Moving slowly, he made his way through the sea of hostile faces, and past the woman who protected the small creature. He knelt, as the goblin shivered in front of him. Waiting until it looked him in the eye, he simply said, “I’m sorry,” and handed the jewel to the goblin. Its shivers came under control, and it looked from the gem to him, first in fear, then in confusion and wonder.

Standing, Richter looked at the woman again and met her eyes. He nodded once, and then shouldered his pack and turned to leave. Sion fell in step behind him.

“Wait,” the woman called. “Why are you here?” There was still some anger in her voice, but it was tinged with curiosity.

Richter turned back, “I met a man named Caulder who said that this was a place we could come and be welcome. I know how ironic that sounds now.”

The woman held his gaze, “Do you promise to not commit any violence while you are under this roof?”

Richter opened his mouth to speak, but she said sharply, “I do not need to hear it from you.”

Sion stepped forward and said, “I reacted, I did not think. My actions have brought dishonor to my Hearth. My name is Sion of the wood sprites of the Forest of Nadria. I swear I will commit no violence if none is committed against me. Kva ti relada voe.”

Preparing to translate, Richter was surprised when the woman responded, “Ti voe reladii.”

Sion had said, ‘my life for my word’ and she had accepted his pledge, ‘your word for your life.’

The woman looked around and addressed all the patrons. They were still on their feet, unsure about the turn of events. “Well ladies and gentlemen, I hope you have enjoyed your mid-dinner entertainment.” A series of chuckles came from all around. “Let’s start the music back. Next round is on the house!”

“And the round after that is on me,” Richter said. More cheers followed his pronouncement.

A grudging smile formed on the woman’s face. “Well you sure make an entrance. Call me Rosy, everybody does.” She extended her hand, but when Richter went to shake it, she moved forward a half step and clasped his wrist. Her grip was surprisingly strong. With a firm shake she released. “Now what can I do for you?”

“We need a place to stay, and I need to sell the goods that we have.”

“You are merchants?” she asked with obvious incredulity. “Never really seen merchants wearing woodland armor before.”

“Not exactly,” Richter said with a small laugh. “What we really need are supplies for my village, and people brave enough to be pioneers.”

“What type of people are you looking for?”

“I need the kind of people that can make a community. Carpenters, farmers, masons, guards, blacksmiths, etc. I have a village rich with resources, but need people to help me realize its potential.”

“Hmmm, well you can sell your items here, though if any are magical you’ll get a much better price in the capital. As far as the people that you are looking for, I’m sure you’ve seen that nonhumans are treated as inferiors in Yves.”

“Yeah, we just spent time in the ministry getting papers for Sion. That’s actually how we met Caulder. He guided us to the appropriate person.”

“Well I don’t know if they explained it, but these rules are new. In the past, the Kingdom had always welcomed the different races. Each worked together for the betterment of all. When the king died though, his son listened to conservative advisors. He started to enact laws that slowly funneled power

and wealth away from Yves's nonhuman citizens. The rumor is that it found its way into the pockets of the king and his friends. Ten years later, all nonhumans are either bound to one place or bonded to a human. That's the significance of those papers you received at the ministry today. Now, you are basically the sprite's guardian. Anything he does you are responsible for. He is 'bonded' to you."

"What is the 'bound' option?"

"Basically like a work permit. Nonhumans get hired under a human to work, but end up getting paid coppers on the gold. They also cannot move far from their job or they get thrown in jail. Hence, 'bound.' You wouldn't believe it, but thirty years ago all races roamed the kingdom openly, sharing their ideas and cultures."

Richter looked around the room, "It seems like you guys are doing pretty good."

"But this is one of the only places in town where the different races mix openly. With the new laws, old hates have risen up. More and more humans are coming to despise anyone different from themselves." Thinking of the younger gate guard, Richter knew he had already experienced this change in opinion.

"Well, you have told me what started your travels, but what can I do

for you now,” she asked.

“We could use a place to stay for the night, and maybe an introduction or two if you can manage it.”

“Done,” she said with another smile. “Each room costs three coppers, but it has two beds and comes with dinner. Looks like Rat has made a good stew tonight. I trust you won’t try and kill our cook again?”

“The goblin is your cook? And his name is Rat?” Sion asked in disbelief.

“Yes, and he makes the best stew in town. I think it’s on account of the goblin’s sense of smell. I am sure we won’t have any more trouble with you?”

“I have agreed to keep the peace and I will. If you say the food is good, then I will trust you. But is his name truly Rat?”

“Yes,” she said with a smile.

“How did he get that name?” the sprite asked.

“You don’t want to know,” she said with the same smile. “Do you have any animals that need caring for?” At Richter’s nod she continued, “Well it is another copper per animal. So are you interested?”

“I am.” Richter liked her straight forward manner, despite their rocky

start.

“Well then,” she said, slapping her thighs. “Let me get you the key to your room. The stable boy will see to your mounts. The soup is almost done. Put your things away, and then go buy some clothes. I don’t know if anyone has told you, but you look a bit odd walking around in green armor.”

Taking the hint, he and Sion followed her directions. After dropping their things in their rooms, they headed outside. Rosy gave them directions to a nearby clothes shop that catered to multiple races. They were soon both outfitted with serviceable traveling clothes and several extra sets each. Richter wore black pants and a beige shirt, both of which fit over his armor. Sion decided to maintain his color scheme, and wore a green tunic that fell over darker green pants. Now properly attired, they made their way back to the inn.

“Hello my friends,” a shout greeted them when they reentered the common room. Caulder sat near the stage where the musicians were performing. He waved them over to the table. When they sat, he raised his mug and drained it in one go. Not missing a beat, he half stood and raised his other hand over his head with three fingers extended, “Rosy, my love. Three ales for three hard working men.” Rosy favored him with a faint smile, and a roll of her eyes.

Sitting back down, Caulder looked at them with a smile, “So was Edwin able to help?”

“Yes, we have the papers for Sion, and we were able to help Edwin with that debt you owed him,” Richter said wryly.

“Yes well, sounds like everybody got what they wanted. You got your papers, Edwin got his coins, and I got the warm feeling of helping someone in need. Ha-ha!”

Laughing at the guard’s roguish wit, Richter couldn’t summon any irritation. The ales were delivered. The three men listened to the music, and drank the slightly bitter brew. After a time, three soups were brought to the table, and even Sion admitted it was a savory fare. They sat in quiet comradery as the hours whiled away. Patrons slowly trickled out until only guests and die-hard drinkers were left. Rosy came to join them as the hustle and bustle of the inn calmed down. “So what’s your next step from here?”

Richter had listened to the conversations at nearby tables, many of them centered on the nonhumans’ discontent with the current course of the kingdom, and dissatisfaction with their treatment as second class citizens. “I feel like there may be many nonhumans who have the skills I need, and aren’t quite happy with the life they’re leading here. I know there are not enough people here in this town who can help me, but there just might be in the

capital city. Do you know anyone that you could introduce me to?”

Rosy’s smile spoke for itself. As the conversation went on, Caulder got up and whispered in the ear of one of the prettier barmaids. After placing a few coppers in her hand, she smiled and they slipped up the stairs to the sound of giggling. Richter furrowed his brow and looked at Rosy. She gave a hearty laugh, “This is the Whistling Hen. For the right price, my girls will put their lips together and whistle you a tune. And you get to pick exactly where they do the whistling!”

Well, Richter thought, smiling, this world certainly *does* have a lot to offer.

CHAPTER 19 – Day 35 – Shibon 23, 15,368 ABG



The next day they sold the weapons and animal skins they had brought with them. The trader could not buy the ice staff, saying it was worth more than he had. He recommended that they take the staff to either a high quality weapons dealer or a mage guild. What they sold only amounted to one gold coin and a handful of silver, but every little bit helped. Richter quickly discovered the conversion ratio of the coins was the same as the game: ten copper made one silver and ten silver made one gold. He also learned that an average laborer made between four to five silver coins every two weeks, or fortnight as they called it. It apparently was just enough to live on. Just like back home there was a well-defined, and large, rich-poor gap. Being a feudal society made it exponentially worse. Rosy told them that nobles and royalty controlled most of the wealth and land. Merchants and skilled craftsmen fell somewhere in the middle. Despite the slightly troubling social inequities, the good news was that the amount of money he had found made him pretty rich indeed.

The town saw a large amount of traffic, being midway between the

capital and Rione. As such it was quite easy to buy and sell mounts. They no longer had a large amount of goods to transport, so they decided to sell the ponies. They would make the rest of the way on foot. With the loss of their pack animals, they actually made better speed. They cast *Weak Haste* as often as possible, limited only by their mana regeneration and the spell's cooldown period. While traveling through the forest, Richter had allocated his 50% skill increase to Air magic, not wanting to risk his percentage points being randomly assigned. That, plus their frequent practicing, allowed him to gain skill level three.

*Congratulations! You have reached level 3 in **Air Magic**. Increasing level allows you to cast stronger spells.*

His relentless mana usage gave an added benefit. He was awarded +1 to his Intelligence and +2 to Wisdom from his frequent mana usage.

A week later, they arrived before the walls of Law, Yves's capital city. They had passed several smaller towns over the past week, making the trip easy and comfortable. The distance they covered must have been farther than the entirety of their journey before, but the well-traveled road made it much easier to travel. While Leaf's Crossing had strong walls and some towers built in for defense, Law seemed unassailable. One hundred foot high walls were topped with crenellated battlements. The city rose up behind the wall, clearly built upon a large hill. It was hard to tell, but it looked like it was

roughly built in concentric circles with the palace on top of the hill. A wide moat surrounded the city walls. The river ran behind the city, and they had dug the moat to be filled with river water. A large flow of traffic moved over the drawbridge and into the city. The guards here wore polished chain mail with halberds held upright. Just like the guards in Leaf's Crossing, they had the crest of blue swords on a green background emblazoned on their chests. The high volume of people and animals moving into the city made stopping everyone for questions unreasonable, but the hawk-eyed gaze of the guards promised swift action in response to any threat.

As they moved past the initial gate and under the walls, Richter was taken aback by its forty-foot thickness. Murder holes and arrow slits could be seen in the ceiling and walls. Exiting the tunnel, there were more guards standing at attention. Most of the crowd were humans. The few nonhumans that were present kept their heads down as if afraid of bringing attention to themselves. The main street of the city was a wide thoroughway, but dozens of avenues meandered off to either side. Richter and Sion went further into the city, and the elevation gradually rose. Their travel was only interrupted once when they passed a patrol of guards. They asked for Sion's papers, but after only a cursory inspection they waved the two Companions on. The quality of the houses and shops improved the higher they went. After walking for half an hour, they took a medium sized street to the left. The lane curved inward

slightly following the natural curve of the hill. They slowly circled the city looking for the inn Rosy had recommended. After being lost several times, they finally arrived at the Laughing Imp.

The Laughing Imp was a good deal more boisterous than the Whistling Hen. Several patrons were slumped over the bar in varying states of intoxication. The smell of the bar was certainly not as clean as the inn that they had come from, but the laughter and joy in the room had the same intensity. Sion and Richter walked to the bar and waited for a moment until a smiling barmaid came up. Bounced up would have been a better description based on her ample chest.

“What can I get you, my dears?”

For too long a moment, Richter stared at her as she breathed heavily, a smile on her lips. When Sion nudged him he realized it had gotten creepy. “Yes! I need to talk to Terrod. Rosy from the Whistling Hen in Leaf’s Crossing sent me.”

Still smiling, she asked them to wait and moved off. She spoke to a man behind the bar who seemed to be giving the punchline of a joke based on the guffaws of the people sitting in front of him. She gestured to Richter and Sion, and he handed her an empty mug to fill. He walked over to the two Companions with a broad smile and an extended hand. He was middle aged

but not old, and had a brown beard that, while a little wild, was not completely unkempt. Richter used *Analyze* on him. It had become a habit with every person he saw. The skill had not yielded anything further than base information so far, but it was still good practice.

Terrod: Human. Lvl 6. Health 170. Mana 110. Stamina 160. Humans...

The man's numbers were higher than expected. Most of the random town or city folk Richter had examined were level three or below. Not surprising since the only way he had found to gain experience seemed to be battle or fulfilling quests. If not for minor quests that dealt with their skill sets, most city dwellers would probably only be level one no matter how high their individual skills were. The guards he had seen were typically level ten or above. Caulder had been level twelve. When asked about it, the man had explained that he was a former soldier. All soldiers were required to fight the random monsters that occasionally cropped up and/or patrol the boundaries of the kingdom. Apparently it was a constant struggle to defend the borders from hostile creatures or raiders.

Richter reached out his hand and clasped wrists with the barkeep.

"My name is Richter. I was sent by Rosy in Leaf's Crossing."

"Shelly told me that. What can I help you with?"

“We are travelers to Esabil.”

Terrod’s smile tightened ever so slightly. “Of course, come with me.” They walked past the bar and into the kitchen. It was a setting of controlled chaos. The typical hustle and bustle of people performing the necessary tasks to keep a kitchen running. Terrod nodded to the various staff, as he walked through to the other side and out the back door. Richter and Sion followed him outside, and down into the alley. Terrod turned and looked at them with a serious expression. All of the laughter and joy had gone from his face.

“You need to tell me who you are, right now. And if I don’t like your answers, this filth-ridden alley will be the last thing you see.” As he had been talking, three of the larger kitchen workers had filed out into the alley holding knives or cudgels. Worse, the direction Richter and Sion had been walking in ended in a blank wall and a pile of rubbish. The three men stood between them and the exit from the alley.

Sion drew his sword causing the toughs to take a threatening step forward. Knowing only seconds remained before the ground of the alley was covered with blood, quite possibly theirs, Richter held out his arms with palms up.

“There is no need for this. We were sent by Rosy, the owner of the Whistling Hen in Leaf’s Crossing. She told me to come here and say that

phrase to you. I have a village. I need specialized labor to build it into something worthwhile. She told me that many nonhumans are unhappy with the new laws, and are not being treated fairly. I can offer them another option. After she heard me out, she said you might know about some people that would be interested.”

Terrod stared at them. “What you are saying is something that anyone would know just by simple gossip. Everyone knows the Laughing Imp welcomes nonhumans. Someone might use that knowledge to try and find malcontents. How do I know that you are not just trying to trick us and then throw us into the King’s dungeons?”

Richter was more than a little annoyed at the treatment he and Sion were receiving, “Listen! I’m here to offer a chance for an honest life to those that deserve it. We gave you the code word. Esabil! If you don’t want to help, that’s fine, we will figure out another way. But if you move any closer to me and my friend, it’s very likely that this alley will be the last thing that YOU see,” Richter warned.

The three men behind them tensed, getting ready for a fight. Richter drew his sword. It was a shame that their bows were unstrung. If Sion could shoot, the outcome of this fight wouldn’t even be a question. Hopefully their armor and superior weapons would win the day. Richter had switched his respawn to the Mist Village, but the option had not come up again since they

started their journey. If he died, it would take several weeks to get back here, and he would lose all of his possessions. He just hoped Sion would be able to escape.

“Stop!” Terrod threw up his hand. “I do not want violence, but I will not let a snake into my house. Can you prove what you are saying? Did she offer you anything that would make me believe you?”

Richter glared at him, blade in hand, “She said you were trustworthy, but that you’re also a suspicious bastard and that you cheat when you play cards.”

A smile twitched on Terrod’s face, “Well that does sound like Rosy. Okay! You have bought yourself a good meal and a place to stay. We will talk again in the morning.” He waved off the three men, and strolled past Richter and Sion as if nothing had happened. “We have lamb tonight, how do you like your ribs?” With that one liner worthy of an 80’s action flick, he walked inside, still with that wry smile on his face.

Richter and Sion looked at each other, and after a moment, both sheathed their swords.

“So do we go back in?” Sion asked.

“It definitely wasn’t the reception I was expecting. They didn’t try to rob us though, they just acted like they had someone to protect,” Richter said,

pondering their options. “So we have two options. We can go back in and see what comes of it or take our chances somewhere else in the city.”

Sion shrugged, “I have never had lamb before, and it did smell good.”

Man logic won the day. They went back into the kitchen, and walked through to the common room. The people there were laughing and enjoying their food with no idea of the violence and death that had almost occurred only a dozen yards away. It was a good lesson, Richter thought. Even though they had left the woods, there was still plenty of danger in the city.

The cute barmaid met them as they left the kitchen, and led them back to a table. She quickly brought two square wooden plates, topped with meat, green vegetables and chunks of bread still steaming from the oven. They both asked her for an ale, and then tucked into the meal. Whatever else could be said of their reception at the Laughing Imp, the food was wonderful. Both sat in silence devoted to their meal, and when second helpings were offered, they both gladly accepted. Richter looked at his small friend polishing off his second plate, and wondered where it all went.

An hour after they sat down, Terrod came by the table and dropped off their room key. He only paused long enough to tell them their room was on the third floor, second door on the left. Then he disappeared back into the kitchen. They sat there a while longer before deciding to call it a night. Their

room here was much the same as their room in the Whistling Hen, maybe a touch bigger and the mattresses slightly smellier. Richter and Sion looked at each other and with silent understanding moved one bed against the door, and the second bed against the first. Feeling safer, they both laid down for the night but kept their weapons close at hand.

They woke the next morning to a rapping on the door. “Terrod would like to see you downstairs,” a feminine voice called out, and then footsteps could be heard walking away from the door and moving downstairs. They both shouldered their packs, and moved the beds away from the door to walk down to the common room.

The bar area smelled surprisingly fresh. The windows had been opened up and a light rain was falling outside. From the scent in the air, someone had either burned incense or thrown sweet grass on the fire which still had smoldering embers from last night. They found Terrod at a central table, smiling and drinking tea. When he saw them, he waved them over, gesturing that they should join him. As they sat down, he poured more tea from the pot into two ready cups.

“Let us get something out of the way,” Terrod said after they had joined him. “I want to apologize about last night. I had a few friends ask around and we found a courier who remembered seeing you entering Leaf’s Crossing at the time you say. Luckily, a man and a sprite are an uncommon

enough sight to merit recall. He remembered you talking to a local guard, and it seemed like you were being shook down.”

“The guard’s name was Caulder. He actually was not a bad guy in the end. It was only because of his recommendation that we ended up at the Whistling Hen.”

Terrod nodded, “It sounds like you were lucky to meet him. The situation in Law is worse than Rosy probably knows. The regulations have grown stricter. Because of that, some nonhumans have started to leave. For a while, that wasn’t a problem. The King didn’t concern himself with the odd nonhuman that wanted to go elsewhere. When the skilled craftsmen started to leave, however, the humans who had been profiting from their labor started to complain. I don’t know if Rosy explained, but all actual business in Yves must be conducted through humans. The human, or representative as they are called, is often allocated by the government. These have become coveted positions. It is basically a way to make money with little effort. The representatives shave off as much money as they want. So when that income was threatened by the nonhumans leaving, the representatives complained. Their government cronies passed another law making it illegal to even leave the kingdom without permission. Anyone caught in the attempt is either released with all of their property confiscated, imprisoned or put back to work with their loved ones ‘detained’ to ensure their cooperation.”

“That’s horrible,” Richter said sincerely, “I had no idea things were that bad here.”

“I am a known opponent of the new laws. I hope you can now understand my skepticism and caution when someone walks up to me out of the blue asking about such a sensitive topic.”

Richter nodded, not willing to completely forget the scene last night, but the explanation made Terrod’s actions understandable, if not immediately forgivable.

“The courier confirming your story was a point for you. So I appreciate you accepting my apology. But despite the fact that you seem like a likeable guy, if you want my help and trust, you need to answer some questions and prove yourself. Now where is this village you need help with?”

“It’s in the Forest of Nadria, I’m not willing to give any specific directions for security reasons.”

“The forest isn’t a safe place. No offense,” Terrod said looking at Sion, “but even your people have been known to claim lives if your territory is infringed upon. And the wood sprites are about the most benevolent force that I know of in that region.”

Richter gave a small laugh, “That’s actually how we met, me almost getting shot full of sprite arrows. The wood sprites and I now have a good

relationship. Though my village's defenses are strong, I won't promise absolute safety. I don't think that exists in any world, but for those who choose to come with me, I offer the chance to be part of something potentially wonderful."

"Hmmm, I don't like the lack of information, but that brings us to the main point: trust. I don't put much faith in words. Actions. Actions are something I can believe in," Terrod said, trailing off and making it clear that there was more to be said.

Sion leaned in, "Just tell us what you want us to do. What is going to gain us your ever so valuable 'trust'?"

Terrod put a large smile on his face, "Why, all I want you to do is to help you help yourselves."

CHAPTER 20 – Day 43 – Shibon 31, 15,368 ABG



Richter learned that Terrod and other sympathetic humans had started to ferry nonhumans out of the city. They had to reach out to various groups, not all reputable, to accomplish this. One of the groups was a local gang called the Night Blades. The plan had been for the nonhumans to make it to the sewers under the city and the Night Blades would help them out of the city from there. Apparently the first half had gone smoothly, but the Night Blades had sent a message to Terrod's compatriots that five coppers per head would have to be paid or they would send the nonhumans to the King's guard. A silver coin was apparently the standard bounty for runaways. The Blades had said they were giving Terrod and his colleagues a bargain.

"We know where our people are being held. There are many people who disagree with the King's laws. They help how they can, like with this information, but not many are fighters. I have five good men that can hold their own and seven more who are willing to fight. What I am saying is we need a bit more muscle. If you help us, I will spread your request to the nonhumans. I will also help arrange travel for anyone that wants to leave the

city. Will you fight?”

*You have been offered a Quest: **Fight for those Who Cannot I.** A group of nonhumans is being held for ransom. Terrod will help you, but only if you help him first. He needs your aid to free the captured nonhumans from the thieves. Reward: Increased reputation with the nonhumans of Yves. Possible colonists to come live in the Mist Village. Yes or No?*

Richter looked at Sion who gave him a nod. Looking back at Terrod, he asked, “What’s the plan?”

“I need to get some things together, rally the troops as it were. Is there anything else you need to do in the city?”

“I need to sell some gems. I also have a magic staff to sell.”

“I know two reliable merchants. Is there anything else?”

“This might be a long shot, but do you know anyone that can teach me magic spells?”

“Mage guilds are sometimes willing to sell lesser spells, but rarely anything stronger.”

“We are new to our magic. Higher level spells are most likely beyond us anyway.”

“Go to Aldimah’s Focus. It’s where I was going to send you to sell

that staff anyway. Walk uphill past two rows of buildings and then go left. Circle a quarter of the city, and you'll see a string of shops. Aldimah's has purple windows and a blue door. I only ask that you return by five bells after midday."

Richter and Sion assured him that they would, and then they left. They decided to see the merchant first, in case they needed more coin to buy whatever spells were available. His shop was only a short walk from the inn. Walking in, they were greeted with a practiced smile. "Gentlemen! Please come in. Whatever you are looking for I am sure I can help you find it, and if not, I am sure I can provide something even better, hazaah!"

The merchant wore a white turban with a colorful feather coming from the front. He was older, and couldn't have been an inch or two over five feet. He carried more than a little weight around his middle. His clothes were loose silk, and he had a red sash tied around his waist.

Amused by the round merchant's demeanor, Richter smiled and said, "Terrod sent us. He said that you could be trusted to treat us fairly."

The merchant's eyes grew somewhat large in alarm. "Yes of course. Please tell Master Terrod that, as always, Hafiz is a humble servant and is happy to help. Any friends of his are already friends of mine."

Richter was somewhat surprised by the reaction. Just what kind of rep

did the innkeeper have? Richter decided that since an honest merchant was most likely as rare and precious a sight as a comet, he would not question his good fortune.

“I am actually here to sell some jewels. They were, err, part of an inheritance.” Richter pulled out the small chest from the Mist Village vault and opened it.

“Sir! Please be careful. That much wealth would be worth all of our lives.” The portly man came from behind the counter, and rushed past them to the door. He closed and locked it while looking out the windows to make sure no one had been looking in. Satisfied that they had not been observed, the merchant walked back behind the counter, and drew aside a curtain. Hafiz motioned for Richter and Sion to follow him.

“You seem to be showing us a great deal of trust,” Richter said.

“You have been sent by Terrod, which means a great deal. You also seem like a good sort overall. Finally, you walked in with a chest of jewels that is most likely worth more than my shop. Not many thieves try to rob you with a golden blade encrusted with diamonds.”

Richter smiled, “Those are some good points. Either way, thank you for your trust, and I promise you that it’s not misplaced.”

Hafiz walked over to a small table with a stool. Several large lamps

made the room well-lit despite the lack of windows. “Please place the chest on the table, good sir.”

Richter laid the chest on the table, and Hafiz began removing the gems one by one. He held each close to his face, looking through a small eye piece that emitted a soft orange glow. He examined each, and made notations on a small piece of paper. “This will take a while, sir. Please feel free to peruse my goods while you wait. There are many different goods up front, but my elite stock is on these back shelves. I invite your companion to stay with me. Always best to keep each other honest, hazaah!”

Smiling again at the strange little man, Richter went back to the front of the shop. Sion decided to stay with the merchant as suggested. Richter walked through the front and found several useful items: rope, flint and steel, oil, and other sundry items. He gathered them on the counter and then moved to the back again to see the merchant’s “elite” items.

The lowest shelves held gems and jewelry. Since he had come to sell jewels, those shelves did not keep his interest. What he found above was much more interesting, however. The first thing his eyes were drawn to was a glass display filled with arrowheads. They all had a slight glow to them.

You have found:
Steel Arrowhead of Dispelling

Durability: 8/8
Item Class: Uncommon
Quality: Superb
Weight: 0.1 kg.

	Traits: Up to a 34% chance to dispel active enchantments on target.
You have found: Steel Arrowhead of Flame	Durability: 9/9 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Will do an additional 4-6 damage on impact. Chance to cause Burn.
You have found: Steel Arrowhead of Stun	Durability: 7/7 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Traits: 46% chance to stun target for 6-8 seconds.
You have found: Steel Arrowhead of Negation	Durability: 8/8 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Chance to ignore magical defenses
You have found: Steel Arrowhead of Weak Poison	Durability: 8/8 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Chance to poison target for an additional 3-4 damage for 6-8 seconds.
You have found: Steel Arrowhead of Freeze	Durability: 8/8 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Will do an additional 10-14 water damage on impact. 7% chance

	to cause Freeze for 7 seconds.
You have found: Steel Arrowhead of Piercing	Durability: 8/8 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Will ignore up to 31% of opponent's armor.
You have found: Steel Arrowhead of Confusion	Durability: 8/8 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Target may attack anyone near, including possibly allies.

Jackpot! Richter moved the box of arrowheads to the front counter.

He also found various other items that would come in handy.

You have found: Ring of Health x 4	Durability: 11/11 Item Class: Common Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Increase maximum Health by +24
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He found four of those.

You have found: Ring of Mana	Durability: 9/9 Item Class: Common Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Increase maximum Mana by +31

You have found:
Belt of Strength

Durability: 9/9
Item Class: Unusual
Quality: Well Crafted
Weight: 0.1 kg.
Traits: Increase Strength by +4

The last item that caught his attention was a black satchel sitting at the end of the shelf.

You have found:
Bag of Holding (Soulbound)

Durability: 50/50
Item Class: Scarce
Quality: Exquisite
Weight: 1.0 kg + 0.1 x total weight of items
Traits: Can hold large number of items. Contents of bag will only be 10% of normal weight. Thinking of desired object will retrieve it from bag. Item is Soul Bound; it cannot be lost or stolen. Can only be transferred with an open heart.

At last! What Richter had been missing more than anything else from his game days was the inventory that was present in every RPG. Having to actually schlep everything he wanted to carry was a real pain in the butt. Anyone who has had to walk back from the store carrying bags of groceries would know what he was talking about. He held the bag almost reverently as he placed it on the counter. By the time he was done perusing, Hafiz was putting down his ledger, done cataloguing the stones in the chest.

“Truly good sir, you are truly blessed to have found such a rich trove of jewels.”

“Are they really that good?”

“Oh yes! My monocle of identification was made by the finest elvish glass smiths and then enchanted by one of the master Light mages of the Illuminator guild. I would stake my reputation by this ledger.” The trader’s voice betrayed excitement, but then he sighed. “As I suspected, I can only afford a portion of these stones.”

The merchant pushed about a fifth of the stones to the side, and they looked mostly to be only the semiprecious stones. “These stones are worth roughly three hundred and ten gold.” Richter coughed, his mouth opening in shock. That was thirty-one thousand dollars. He was hoping that the gems would cover his costs, but if Hafiz was correct, his chest was worth more than a hundred grand, maybe closer to two or even three.

Hafiz misunderstood Richter’s expression. “I promise you sir that this is a fair price. I am an honest merchant, and especially would not cheat of friend of Mr. Terrod.” Richter closed his mouth and assured the man that he trusted his good intentions. Mollified, Hafiz continued, “I have this amount in gold bands.” He laid two finger length rectangular bars of gold down on the table along a heavy bag and ten individual gold coins. Seeing Richter’s

questioning look, he explained. “Each of these bars is the equivalent of one hundred gold coins. Now if you allow me, I can see what you have picked from my stock, and we can do the rest in trade.”

The rotund man walked up to the counter, making short oohs and aahs he lined up each item and placed a gem next to each. The arrowheads equated to a thumbnail sized jade and large amber. The rings a slightly larger turquoise and two pearls. The Belt of Strength, a square cut emerald, and the basic items he piled together equated to a tiger’s eye. When he came to the bag however, he looked at Richter for a moment and then firmly placed two diamonds in front of it.

Richter coughed in shock. He knew because of the bag’s stats, as well as its usefulness, it would be expensive, but good god. Two diamonds that size probably meant he was paying as much for that bag as he had for his first car. Suddenly an argument with an ex-girlfriend came to mind where she criticized him for wasting money on video games, and he threw her expensive purse collection back at her. She had of course responded, “It’s an investment.” His response that maybe math wasn’t her strong suit had not gone well. Sigh, live and learn. Maybe if the purse had been able to fold space to make a pocket dimension, then she would have had a point though.

Even though it was painful he looked Hafiz in the eye and nodded his assent. The man grinned broadly, and clapped his hands. “Praise to the lord

of commerce, let us both profit from this day, hazaah!” Shaking hands, they finished the deal. Richter was surprised when Hafiz reached out with both hands and laid them on the bag. A white light emanated from his hands, and when he removed them a clear gem sat on the bag. At the merchant’s gesture, Richter picked up the gem and was greeted with the prompt.

*Would you like to take ownership of this **Bag of Holding**? Yes or No?*

Choosing “Yes,” the gem disappeared, and he found a new small icon in the corner of his vision which looked like the black bag. Selecting it, a 20x20 empty grid appeared. Unable to keep a look of childlike glee from his face he began placing and then removing items from the bag. Just as described, as soon as he reached into the bag, he simply had to focus on the object he wanted and it would materialize in his hand, ready to be pulled out. He placed the magic staff in, and sure enough its entire length disappeared into bag. The staff took up a 3x1 area of the grid. He then decided to put a copper, silver and gold coin in the bag, and retrieved each in turn. He might be excited, but he wasn’t about to throw all of his money into a black hole without making sure he could get it back first. Seeing as it was a success though, he placed the gold bands as well as his coins into the Bag of Holding. Thieves had been a major concern for him since coming to the city, but now he could rest relatively easier, needing only to keep track of the one bag. Each type of coin took up one slot in the bag, and clearly displayed the

amount of each. He placed the rest of the gems back in the chest and placed it into the bag. Spending a few more moments, he transferred over the contents of his old pack. Each herb stacked, and made it much easier to organize. The bag was amazing. Best of all, it was Soul Bound. He finally didn't need to worry about losing all of his items if he died again.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, good sir?” Hafiz asked.

“Do you have any maps? Magic or otherwise?”

“I have a few regular maps of the surrounding areas and waterways.”

Hafiz's face adopted a speculative look, “I also have one other item. Please give me a moment, sir.” The white clad merchant walked to the back.

He came back after a few minutes. In his hands was a two-foot long parchment that was bound with a green and yellow striped ribbon.

“This is a Traveler's Map, sir. Are you familiar with their guild?”

Richter shook his head.

“They are a potpourri of different races. Some are magic users, others are fighters, some are simple woodsmen, and the only thing they have in common is a love of travel. Either singly or in groups, they move across the land and create maps of the world. They sell these for exorbitant fees to the rich and powerful. The price is paid however, because this is actually an extremely versatile tool. It provides access to whatever information the

Traveler imparted to this map. You can even access the map mentally without opening the physical scroll. Finally, owning the parchment lets you add your own geographic information. As the map is bound to you, the physical map will only show information that you wish shared.”

Richter’s fingers started to tingle. The item sounded amazing. As the description grew more detailed however, Richter’s heart began to sink. This must be an item of incredible cost. True, he probably had the gems to pay for it, but Richter was not one to squander money. He might be looking at an eternity here, and being careless with money today could mean centuries of hard times ahead.

The reluctance on his face must have been apparent. Hafiz moderated his excited tone, “As I said, normally this is only an item for the wealthiest of patrons, but the information contained within is only as current as when the map was made. The particular Traveler that made the map lived at least two hundred years ago, possibly a good deal longer ago than that. It was found in the belongings of a recently departed nobleman. His family had fallen on hard times because of his love of the bottle. As such, he left his children with few assets and even less regard for him. They sold his items quickly and cheaply. So you see, with this particular map, I have no idea about the usefulness of any of the information contained within. The enchantments will still work either way though, sir, so it is a valuable item nonetheless. If you

are interested, I could relinquish it for only one more small diamond.”

Richter understood what Hafiz was saying. The information was most likely hopelessly out of date. It was a risk to buy it. Admittedly he could make his own maps, and so the item was very useful in and of itself. Xuetrix the imp had said The Land was bigger than the Earth. If that was true he had seen less than 1% of 1% so far. Richter weighed the pros and cons and decided that even if the Traveler’s information was useless, the map itself was a good investment in his future. After all, G Maps had been about the most used app on his phone. He did need to know one thing though.

“How much are these diamonds worth, Hafiz?”

“Well sir, each is high quality and cut finely. So per carat each will be worth fifty gold coins.”

Richter’s eyes bulged again. Five thousand dollars! He dreaded asking the next question, but couldn’t help himself. “So how many carats were in the diamonds I have already traded you?”

“The diamonds you traded for the bag were two carats each. I will trade the map for this other diamond which is a bit over one carat,” the merchant replied promptly.

Richter sighed deeply. He almost wished he didn’t know. His calculations had been off. Those two diamonds had been worth more than his

first car, a lot more. He tried to comfort himself that he couldn't take it with him when he died, but he realized that now he could. He could and would take it with him. He tried to focus on the big picture, but his mind shouted that twenty-five thousand bucks worth of stones was a pretty damn big picture!

Richter finally closed his eyes and rubbed the spot on his ear that always relaxed him. He had followed George Takei on Facebook when he was back on Earth, and one day it had showed a pressure point called "Shen Men." Apparently it translated to "heavenly gate." He had tried rubbing it, and actually found it was very relaxing. He closed his eyes to try to find the same peace with the gentle massage. Surprisingly a prompt came up. It was very strange seeing something even with his eyes closed.

*Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: **Pressure Points**. Certain points on bodies can harm or heal. In unarmed combat, certain spots will draw your attention, and you will know intuitively what they do. This is a subskill of Unarmed Combat. As you have learned this subskill, you have also learned Unarmed Combat.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Unarmed Combat**. You can attack and defend yourself without the crutch of weapons.*

Thank you, Hikaru Sulu! Richter was stacking up these skills! Taking

his new skill as an omen, he nodded to Hafiz, and pushed the diamond across the table, picking up the map. “How do I use it?”

Hafiz touched the map and again a white light flared, leaving a clear ownership gem in its place, “Simply break the seal and pick up the gem,” he said.

Richter did as instructed.

*You have found: **Traveler’s Map**. Would you like to accept ownership? Yes or No?*

As if he had paid all that dough for nothing. He accepted “Yes,” and a small map icon appeared at the corner of his gaze. The gem crumpled to dust after he accepted ownership. He selected the icon, and a translucent, almost opaque screen appeared to fill most of his visual field. It was like looking down from above. The map was centered on Law, and the city took up about half the screen. But what if I want to see more or a different scale, Richter thought. Immediately a bar appeared vertically at the edge of the map. Focusing, he could make the slider on the bar move up and down and the map zoomed in and out. At maximum zoom, Richter could make out individual streets in the city. At minimal zoom the map showed Law as a small circle. The Kingdom of Yves was a roughly circular patch of green with a dotted line surrounding it. To the east of the kingdom was a yellow

patch written as 'Plains of Gold,' and just north were the 'Singing Hills' and 'Whisper Woods of Grevnt.' Richter could see the Serrated Mountains and north of them was the Kingdom of Rione, but it was called the 'Villages of Rione.' Several other small kingdoms dotted the map. Farther north was a large swath of greyed out area called simply 'the Wilds.' The Forest of Nadria occupied the right side of the map. Going to medium zoom many dungeons, caves, crypts and other points of interest could be seen. It was strange, that some areas had more color on the map and others were almost monochromatic. He soon figured out that the colored areas followed his own path since coming to the Land. He had to guess that more color meant more current information. The map was amazing.

He zoomed out to maximum and the colored part of the map became a small island in a sea of black. He zoomed back in. Off to the bottom right there was a small glowing arrow. Richter changed his focus and the map slid in that direction, no longer focused on the Kingdom. It moved past the Forest, over the open ocean and then settled over a series of islands. The map named them the 'Isles of Lonyu.' On the second biggest was a glowing marker. When he zoomed in he saw was a small dilapidated castle. Another prompt filled the screen.

*You have discovered the **Lost Citadel of the Mage Poquatil.***

*You have been offered a Quest: **Right an Ancient Wrong I.** The Traveler that*

made this map accepted a quest that remains undone. As he is now dead, and no previous owners of this map have completed it, the task now falls to you. You must travel to the Lost Citadel and find the remains of the mage Poquatil. Unlock the mystery of the Lost Citadel. Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?

A lost castle on a hidden island discovered on a treasure map? Uhhhh, yes please. It seemed like the kind of quest that gave legendary or even artifact gear. It also seemed like the kind of quest that had monsters that would use his balls for ju-ju bees at his current level. Looking closely at the map he saw that the citadel was considered a timeworn dungeon. That meant it was at least a thousand years old, and possibly up to ten thousand years old. He couldn't tackle it at his current low level, but that wouldn't always be a problem, now would it? No, it would not, Richter thought with a smile. Then he thought, it's kind of creepy to be talking to yourself in the third person. I need to stop this. He dismissed the map.

A second prompt had been hidden behind the first. Hafiz had been looking at him as he worked with the maps functions. "Are you satisfied with your purchase, sir?"

"Oh yes," Richter replied with a smile.

"Hazaah! Most happy to have been of service then," Hafiz replied

with a smile of his own. “I will allow you to peruse these other standard maps as part of the price of the diamond. Now is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Not right now, but I may need a varied amount of items later. I will need them brought to Leaf’s Crossing and perhaps even further. Could you arrange that?”

“I am ever your humble servant, good sir,” Hafiz said, bowing his head. Hafiz handed him a bundle of arrow shafts to affix the arrowheads. Richter had said he was going to use his sprite arrows, but Sion had told him mixing magic was never wise. He warned that even imbuing an arrow that was already enchanted could be dangerous unless you had a strong control of the flow of magic. Deciding to follow his friend’s advice, Richter thanked Hafiz and accepted the shafts. He then equipped his rings and belt. He felt a perceptible change in his body as it filled out slightly, reflecting his increased stats. Shaking hands with the merchant one last time, Richter and Sion left the shop. Two bells tolled as they walked outside letting them know there wasn’t much time left before they had to meet back at the inn.

They followed Terrod’s instructions to reach Aldimah’s Focus. The storefront looked much as Terrod had explained it. The panes of purple glass were varied in color. As they walked into the door, they heard a chime. A tall man came to the front. Not wasting any time, Richter said, “Terrod sent us.”

“What does he need?” the man asked curtly. There was none of the obsequiousness that Hafiz had displayed.

“It is actually myself and my friend that are looking to trade,” Sion replied.

“Then what do you need?” he asked gruffly.

“I’m looking for spells, my Companion specifically for Air Magic, but I’m interested in anything useful.”

The man’s face grew somewhat guarded and then he started speaking, clearly rattling off a form response, “By the laws of the King, magic can only be taught to and by members of licensed guilds.”

The merchant stared at them both, no one speaking.

Richter placed a small jewel on the counter.

He looked at what Richter had dropped and then looked back up. The faintest of smiles graced the man’s face. “But laws do not put food on the table, do they? Come to the back. Ryun. Come watch the front.”

A teenage boy walked up from the back to stand behind the counter. Richter and Sion followed the man, walking through a back door into another room. He sat at a circular table and offered for them to join him.

“Are you Aldimah?” Richter asked.

“No, Aldimah is right behind you,” he said pointing behind Richter and to the left.

A hand gripped Richter’s shoulder just as the man pointed, “Holy sh-!” He had thought only the three of them were in the room. Scrabbling to turn quickly, he knocked over a chair. A golden skinned elf stood before him. She had silver hair; not with age, but as if someone had spun pure metal. She wore blue robes with arcane sigils in silver thread embroidered along the hem. She looked like she was Richter’s age, but he realized you couldn’t really tell in such a long lived race. A wry and somewhat mischievous smile was on her face as she said, “I am sorry. I get so bored cooped up in here.”

“Which doesn’t make it right,” the merchant said in admonishment.

“I am sorry,” she said contritely, letting her head hang just a bit.

“Hmph,” the man just grunted in reply, but he seemed mollified.

“Please don’t give it another thought,” Richter replied with a faint smile. She really was remarkably beautiful. “So you are Aldimah?”

She gave a small laugh, her voice resounding with the purest tones. If the Wood Sprites were woodwinds when they spoke, she sounded like a violin. “Aldimah is my grandfather’s name. He founded this shop, but he and the rest of my family left Law several years ago. I have been running it with our old family friend Killik,” she said, pointing to the merchant. “You may

call me Leandra.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Richter replied. “Terrod sent us here when I said I wanted to learn some spells.”

“You do know that it is against the King’s laws to learn spells outside of a registered guild?” Her voice had the same practiced tone of recitation that Killik’s had earlier.

“We’ve been over that, Leandra,” Killik said.

She gave another small laugh and looked at Killik, “You *are* the one that always told me to say it.” Looking at Richter, she said, “My powers are focused in Earth and Water magic. I have some spell books that can teach you some low level spells, if you have the affinity and level to learn them.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Richter said with a smile.

“Do you have any experience with Earth or Water? No? Then you can only learn level one spells, but they should still help you.” She took three books from a shelf along the wall.

You have found: Book of Weak Barkskin	Durability: 10/10 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.4 kg Spell School: Life Traits: This spell will increase your natural armor by +2
You have found:	Durability: 12/12

Book of Grease	Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.4 kg Spell School: Earth Traits: This spell will make a 10x10 foot area slick with grease. It greatly increases the chance of anyone in the area falling down
You have found: Book of Weak Ice Dagger	Durability: 11/11 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.6 kg. Spell School: Earth Traits: This spell will throw a +5 damage dagger made of ice at your target

All the spells seemed pretty basic and uniform. That didn't mean they weren't also wonderfully useful. He especially liked the *Grease* spell. In Richter's experience, even high level enemies could be affected indirectly by spells that changed the environment. He remembered a tough fight from years ago. He had to kill a dungeon boss. It was a death knight whose spell resistance was so high that no spells could touch it. A mage he was playing with had created an icy floor, though, that made the knight fall on its back. Richter had been able to score an easy critical strike after that and win the battle.

"I'll take them all," Richter said. He was practically salivating

thinking of increased capabilities.

“At two each that will be six gold coins.”

Errrrrrch! What was wrong with these people? It seemed like they were determined to bleed him dry. He had to fight the impulse to see if after he bought two whether he could get the third for free. Six hundred dollars for three books. Say what you want about massed produced crap back home, it made things cheaper. He did have a thought though. Using Analyze on Leandra, he had her stats.

Name: **Leandra**. High Elf, Lvl 8. Health: 160/160. Mana 194/250.
Stamina 110/110. Disposition: Neutral.

“Each of these spells seems like it takes about 10% of your mana,” Richter said, enjoying her shocked look. He was also wondering at what spell she could have recently cast and more importantly who she could have cast it upon. He decided to let it go. “I would think that a way for you to be able to reduce the cost of your spells would be valuable.” He withdrew the blue staff from his Bag of Holding. He handed it to her, allowing a closer examination.

Leandra took the staff, looking at him, but then switched her gaze to the item in her hand. She muttered an incantation, one hand moving in a specific gesture. A white flare that looked like when Futen identified items

extended from her hand and surrounded the item. Her look of surprise switched to one of excitement and greed. She began muttering to herself. “Leg bone of a frost giant... Steeped in the waters of the Great Northern Glacier... Must have been enchanted by...” She came back to herself all of a sudden, seeming to realize how transparent she was being, and tried to shift her features to studied nonchalance. “It’s a nice trinket.”

A large, wolf-like smile was on Richter’s face, and he settled into some serious haggling.

An hour later, the two Companions left the shop, and Richter had three new spell books and several restore health, mana and stamina potions. He had even bartered to obtain the recipes to health, mana, cure poison, and other useful potions for Sion, who assured him that the ingredients were easily found in the forest. For all of these goods, he ultimately gave her two gold and four silver coins. He was even able to secure a 10% discount on future purchases. Leandra didn’t seem to mind much though as she lovingly held her new staff. He could swear she was cooing to it. Before leaving the shop he opened and read each book. The same process occurred as with the Book of Weak Charm, each crumbling to dust and leaving him with a new spell. Reading them gave him two new corresponding skills. There was also a pleasing third prompt.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Earth Magic**. You can utilize*

the magic of the very rocks. With Earth magic you can poison your enemies, summon powerful creatures and greatly increase your defense. A master of this Basic Element can sunder the very... earth.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Water Magic**. This magic lets you use ice to kill and water to drown your enemies. It is also the Basic Element most used to confuse and befuddle the senses. A master of this Power can lock cities into frozen wastelands.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Trade**. Bargaining has afforded you a better price. Increasing this skill will allow for better prices and open new business opportunities.*

Leandra agreed to keep an eye out for other spell books. Richter and Sion thanked her, and then hurried back to the inn, knowing not much time was left. Going inside, one of the men behind the bar made eye contact with Richter and nodded his head towards the back. They made their way past the smiling patrons and entered the kitchen.

Terrod met them and walked back into the alley again. Immediately cautious, Richter and Sion slowed down, but this time the innkeeper kept walking without pause to an open sewer grate and climbed down. Having no choice, they followed him in. They stayed to the side once they reached the bottom to avoid the stream of foul smelling water flowing down the tunnel.

The sewer was made of dark stone with an indentation in the middle to channel the flow. They could stand upright, but Richter only just. Terrod was ahead of them, moving along the right side of the tunnel, torch in hand. They hurried to follow.

They took turn after turn until Richter had no idea as to their current location. He guessed that was part of the point though. Terrod finally stopped in front of a ladder leading up. He climbed it and opened a trapdoor at the top, allowing the sound of hushed voices to come through. They followed him up and found themselves in a warehouse filled with boxes. It had a dirt floor and straw was scattered on the ground. There were twelve other figures there. Everyone quieted upon seeing Terrod.

“Alright gents. I am glad we are all here. The two with me I vouch for. They will stay with me. Go back to what you are doing. I will fill them in on the plan.” The men continued on with their preparations and Terrod turned to Richter and Sion. “Alright, the plan is relatively simple. We are going to strike just after midnight. The Night Blades have a base on the wharf. That’s where we are now, but all the way on the other side of the harbor. We have been told this base is where they have our people. As you have already seen, many of these buildings are attached to the sewers. If we attack above, you can be sure they will bolt underneath. So we have divided into two groups. You will be with me and we will be in the group attacking underneath. We

will try to quietly disable anyone we find in the tunnels. When we hear the attack above, we wait a moment so it draws focus, and then kill anyone attempting to flee. After that we move in and attack these bastards from behind. Do you have any questions?”

Richter had nodded along while Terrod was speaking, but at the end he had a suggestion of his own. “It sounds like there is going to be a lot of close fighting for the group underground. Sion should be in the above ground attack. He is tough in a close up fight, but he is absolutely deadly with a little room to wield his bow. Are you okay with that?” he asked his friend.

Sion looked at him somewhat concerned, “Are you sure you don’t need me to watch your back?” His gaze wavered to the other men for a moment, the implication clear that the Night Blades might not be the only danger.

“This is going to require trust on all of our parts. And I think it’s understood that there will be vengeance on anyone breaking that trust,” Richter said, looking Terrod in the eye.

The man didn’t seem offended by the veiled threat, “I absolutely agree,” he said, returning Richter’s gaze. “Randal,” he said over his shoulder, summoning a man to him. “The sprite is going to be with you. Apparently he is pretty good with the bow.”

Randal looked at Sion with disbelief, “Hey little man, you sure you can handle yourself, *urk!*”

An arrow was suddenly quivering in a crate only an inch from the questioning man.

“I didn’t even see him move...,” Randal said in disbelief. He continued in a respectful voice, “We will count ourselves lucky to have you among our number, sir sprite. Please come with me and we will figure out the best role for you.”

Sion walked off with the man, leaving Richter with Terrod. The reserved man looked at Richter, “The walk to their base by tunnel should take the better part of an hour. We will leave at eleven bells. Take the time to center and prepare yourself. We will be safe here until it’s time.” He walked away to confer with the other men.

Richter decided to spend his time practicing his new spells. He started with *Weak Ice Dagger*, mostly because it sounded coolest if he was being honest. Focusing upon the spell, he immediately felt a chill in his hand. Strange, he thought. He let go of his focus and the sensation disappeared. It hadn’t been painful or unpleasant, just surprising. Looking at a crate against the wall he invoked the spell. His left arm wove in a specific gesture and a word of Power tumbled from his lips. One second later, his arm shot out of

its own accord and a one-foot dagger made of ice materialized from his finger tips and flew forward to strike the crate. It penetrated the wood and stuck there. He walked up to it and examined the blade.

It had a simple spiral handle with no cross guard. The “blade” was a cone coming up from the hilt. He wrenched the blade to the side, but it did not snap in two; apparently the ice that comprised it was extremely dense. He was able to pull it out of the crate and saw that it ended in a wickedly sharp point. It also remained solid in his hand and he was able to slam it back in the crate, leaving it stuck there. He hadn’t counted on being able to use the dagger after it was “thrown.” He would never be without a weapon again.

Next he cast *Weak Barkskin*. His skin grew rough and the sensation in his fingertips decreased slightly. Drawing the dagger from the crate, he scraped the point along his skin with little effect. He pressed lightly and then somewhat harder before it was able to pierce his skin despite its sharp point. He was clearly not impervious, but the spell was a large improvement to the unarmored parts of his body.

Last he cast *Grease*. The floor looked slightly shinier and darker in the torch light, but otherwise there was no real effect. He was wondering how to test it, when one of the men to his right fell with a loud curse. Another fell trying to help him. They looked around with irritation until seeing Richter’s sheepish expression. The tirade that followed convinced him to sit quietly

and wait for the operation to begin.

CHAPTER 21 – Day 43 – Shibon 31, 15,368 ABG



Richter, Terrod and two other men, Jason and Jeremy, made their way along the tunnels. The two men were in front checking for traps as they were nearing the Night Blades' hideout. They had already led their group past two tripwires. A shuttered lamp provided the barest illumination. The lead man, Jason, held up his hand and gestured around the corner. "They are right around the bend," he said softly. "There are two of them. I can take one from a distance. The question is, are you any good with that," he asked, indicating Richter's bow.

"I can handle myself. I can't guarantee a silent kill though. I'm assuming quiet is what we are going for."

"As long as we can kill them quickly, and keep them from getting back into their lair we should be safe enough."

Richter snuck a glance around the corner. He could see two vague shapes standing about five feet apart. Unlike their entrance to the tunnel, it appeared that there was a door built into the side of the sewer tunnel. The closest was about 30 yards away.

“I am pretty sure I can get a chest shot on the closest one,” Richter said softly.

“Okay then, I can sneak relatively safely another ten yards down the tunnel before they should be able to detect me,” Jason said, cocking a crossbow. “After I go around the corner, count to ten and then take your target out. If you hear shouts, come around the corner immediately before these motherless trops kill me.” With a nod at Terrod, he went around the corner.

Richter counted silently. Unfortunately, he had only gotten to five when the screaming started. Terrod and Jeremy went around the corner immediately. Richter was only a half-step behind. Jeremy unshuttered the lamp to cast light on the situation. Jason was on the ground, blood freely flowing from his left foot. The thief that had been closest to the door had a small crossbow out, and was aiming at the downed man. The other thief was turning to the door, clearly about to enter and sound the alarm.

Richter took in all of this in an instant. In even less time he chose his target, aimed and fired. The closest thief was shot through the chest and his crossbow discharged harmlessly into the sewer floor. The other one was able to make it through the door and raise the alarm, though. Though he did not notice, a message indicator appeared along the edge of Richter’s vision.

Jason held up his hands and shouted “Stop! Don’t step in the puddles, they are studded with spikes.” A trip wire was seen across the length of the tunnel. Jason must have stepped over it, but had then stepped into a pool of water on the other side and impaled himself on a concealed spike. Terrod went to him and bandaged the foot quickly, stemming some of the blood flow. He murmured to the man who nodded with a pained look on his face. Terrod looked at Richter, “We keep going. Our men above will be slaughtered if they attack alone. It’s just that now we will bear the brunt of the attack, and they will attack from behind. Are you with me?”

Richter simply said, “I finish what I start.” He cast *Weak Haste* upon himself and readied another arrow.

Terrod raised his mace and pulled open the door. He slammed it shut again immediately as two thuds were heard and the door quivered. A third thud was punctuated by a crossbow bolt piercing the door. He smiled wildly, “Two on the left and one on the right,” and then he opened the door and dove through with Jeremy right behind him. Richter stepped up to the door and scanned for enemies. Terrod was fighting one and Jeremy was on the left fighting the other two. There was no way for him to have a clear shot, let alone imbue his arrow. The blast could easily damage his two fighters. Worse he could hear feet on the stairs at the back of the room, the steps quickly growing louder. Left with no other choice, he cast *Grease*.

What happened next would have been funny if it weren't a life or death situation. All five combatants started wind-milling their arms as they struggled to keep balance. Terrod went down first and Richter shot his opponent in the shoulder dropping her to the ground. Jeremy managed to collapse into a chair, his two opponents falling on the floor. Richter felt bad for a moment ending the lives of men that could not defend themselves, but then another thief came down the stairs. The five minute duration of the spell hadn't ended yet so he fell flat on his face upon entering the small room.

Richter placed an arrow in the chest of both of Jeremy's opponents in quick succession. He then imbued an arrow and shot it at the thief who had come down the stairs. The man had managed to climb up to all fours and so took the arrow in the head. The force of the blow sheared away most of his face, splattering blood and flesh over the floor.

Richter nocked another arrow while he watched Terrod drive a knife into a thief's throat. One of the other thieves lay on the ground, unmoving. Richter's chest shot, coupled with the thief's prone position, had allowed for a critical strike and instant death. The last thief had turned over a table and was hiding behind it. Breathing a deep sigh, Richter charged his nocked arrow for several seconds before firing at the table. It struck the table top and exploded it inwards. The thief was thrown against the wall, stunned. Jeremy carefully walked forward and then stabbed him in the heart.

Amazingly, all three of them had made it through the fight unscathed, not counting a few bumps and bruises that is. Not wasting their initiative, they moved to the stairs. Terrod looked at Richter, "Shoot up the stairs with your power arrow. Clear'em out."

Richter peeked up the stairs which were mercifully clear. He downed a mana potion and waited a few seconds. Then he nocked an arrow and held the charge until the black flashes ran over the gold aura then released. The arrow struck the wall at the top of the stairs. The resultant boom in the confined space made all of their ears ring, but judging from the cry of pain at the top of the stairs, the thief that had been hiding at the top suffered far worse. Jeremy and Terrod rushed up the stairs.

Richter recast *Weak Haste*, not wanting the spell to run out in the middle of the fight. More than half of his mana was gone, but his health was full and his stamina had only decreased by a tenth from his exertions and limited use of *Focus*.

He followed behind the others. At the top of the stairs, Terrod and Jeremy turned left and immediately started swinging their weapons. Richter looked to the right, but saw nothing except a darkened hallway. He turned to cover his comrades and immediately felt an intense pain in his lower back. A warning indicator showed massive damage and his health dropped by one hundred points. Turning his head, he saw a man behind him. The thief had

stabbed him with a dagger in his lower back. The blade had struck at the break between his chest plate and armored pants. The bastard must have been stealthed and then crit'd him.

Muffling a scream, he threw his elbow into the thief's face, and heard the crunch of a nose. He lost his bow in the process, but the blade came out of his back as he got a couple feet of space between him and his attacker. He invoked *Weak Ice Dagger*, but his cast was off and it failed to pierce the leather armor the thief was wearing. The thief lunged with his dagger and Richter twisted to the side, the blade slicing into his pants. Luckily, their reinforced nature kept it from biting deeply into his skin. He grabbed the thief's wrist with his right hand. They strained for a moment, Richter struggling to control the thief's blade hand. His increased strength was apparently just enough to keep his opponent from gaining the upper hand. Richter drew his sword across his body with his left hand and slammed the pommel into his opponent's already ruined nose.

The first strike caused a soft sound like slamming a hammer into meat. The second pommel blow caused a deeper crunch than the first as the delicate bones in the face crumpled under the steel ball at the end of his hilt. The man screamed in total agony. Richter used the thief's disorientation to wrest the dagger from his hand. He plunged the rogue's own dagger into the man's neck. A spurt of arterial blood sprayed across the wall and Richter's

face when he withdrew the blade.

The pain that he had been able to ignore for a few seconds slammed back to the forefront of his consciousness, making his vision grow dim. He invoked his Minor Ring of Healing, which took the edge off of the pain. Reaching into his bag he pulled out a health potion. The sounds of pain coming from the other room let him know that he didn't have any time to waste. He cast *Weak Barkskin*, castigating himself for not casting it prior to coming up the stairs. Shoving the thief's dagger through his belt, he sheathed his sword and picked up his bow. Richter placed an arrow on string and hobbled into the next room. The sight that greeted him was not a welcome one.

Terrod had said the Night Blades were a gang about forty strong. An informant had told him that normally only ten to fifteen were in the hideout at night. The rest were out conducting various business and nefarious activities. After all, nighttime was worktime for the thieves. Counting the five that had already died and the few that were on the ground, the dozen or so still standing meant that about half the guild must have been present during the attack. Not counting Terrod, Richter or Sion, there were only six fighters left fighting the rogues tooth and nail.

The only thing that seemed to be preserving his group was that the thieves were fighting cautiously to keep themselves away from the door to

the outside. When one crossed in front of the door, a blue streak struck her in the leg causing an audible snap. Well, that explains that, Richter thought. The thieves were positioning the fighters as a shield against Sion. It wasn't a bad plan as they had greater numbers and would wear down the band of inexperienced fighters soon enough. Then they could rush the sprite en-masse and overcome him. That didn't even take into account the reinforcements that could arrive at any time. Richter decided it was time to ruin their day.

Drawing his bow, he imbued an arrow with minimal force and shot at the closest thief. Not waiting to see results he switched to the next and then the next. Over the next few minutes, Richter and Sion took shots of opportunity and their punishing fire broke the will of their opponents. The thieves began throwing their weapons down and falling to their knees. A couple tried to run out into the street, but an arrow from both Sion and Richter landed critical shots in their backs and ended their concerns for the matters of this life. Unfortunately, two more of their group had been killed in the time it took to subdue the thieves. The final tally was nine of their number were killed or injured. They had won, but they paid a bloody bill.

They were left with four fighters plus Richter and Sion now guarding three thieves. Two of the standing fighters were wounded with a leg or arm severely hampered. Terrod's left eye was swelling shut and blood ran freely from a cut on his cheek. The potion and the healing magic of the ring had

restored the majority of his health, but Richter's constant movement had reopened the dagger wound in his back causing a small bleeding status. He placed several healing herbs into his mouth and handed a few out to his comrades. Terrod was shouting into the face of one of the prisoners.

"Where are they? I know they have not left this building yet so where are they?" The thief stared back insolently. Terrod struck him in the face and then repeated his question. No response. Terrod kicked the man in the chest knocking him down. When he yanked him back up and repeated the question, the man just glared and then spit on the floor.

Richter's mana was almost completely depleted at this point, and continual use of *Focus* to avoid hitting his allies had left him with only 20% of his stamina. Neither was refilling quickly. He had to invest more into Wisdom, especially if he was going to start expanding his spell base. Knowing that even a relatively small force of thieves would wipe them out in their weakened state, Richter stepped forward, "Terrod, let me try."

Looking at the prisoner, Richter frowned, "Look, I know you don't want us here. We don't want to be here. There has been blood spilled on both sides. Maybe we are all at fault, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that we work together so that we may all see the sunrise. I could continue to let fire fly between you and my friend here, but I don't have the time. Please just show some decency and tell us where the captives are?" Richter's tone was

full of calm and serenity.

Looking up at Richter, the thief replied, “You, and everyone you love, are dead. You think you accomplished something here tonight? Ha! These were our rookies, the ones that were only good for making dinner and ensuring the building didn’t burn down. We will refill our ranks, and when our veterans return, I will enjoy seeing you peeled like a grape.”

Richter nodded during this entire response, looking thoughtful and not interrupting. At the end, he firmed his lips, nodded once more, and then drove his dagger into the thief’s eye. The body started spasming, and even as he cleaned his blade on the dead man’s clothes, the right leg continued to kick erratically. With a deep sigh, he moved to the next kneeling man.

“Look. I know you don’t want us here. We don’t want to be here. There has b-”

The man interrupted, “We are both at fault. I agree, please let me help you find your friends.”

“Thank you, lead the way,” Richter said. Terrod stared at him with wide eyes.

The man walked ahead of them to a blank wall. Running his hand along the wooden panels, he found what he was looking for. A small square of wall depressed, and the thief placed his hand inside. They heard a click,

and then a section of wall opened. Dragging the door open, a room could be seen with a trap door in the floor.

“Open it,” Terrod commanded.

The thief looked nervous, but did as he was told. As soon as the hatch was lifted, the smell of unwashed bodies mixed with bodily waste was palpable. Faint wails of despair came out of the hole.

“Get them out of there!” Terrod screamed, grabbing the man by the nape of his neck and shoving him toward a ladder.

“Everyone! It’s Terrod. We are getting you out of here. Come up the ladder as quickly as you can.”

Stinking, weakened figures climbed up the ladder and stood to the side. Upon seeing the thief many began to hiss and grumble. One dwarf wrapped his hands around the man’s neck to throttle him. Terrod had to pull him off, saying they still needed the thief alive. About thirty prisoners made their way up the ladder, Terrod staring in each face before moving to the next. When no one else came up, he grew frantic, “Is anyone else still down there? Isabel! Where is Isabel?”

An older dwarf said, “They separated her and a few others from the rest of us as soon as we got here. We haven’t seen her in days.”

Terrod stomped towards the thief with murder in his eyes.

“Th-they sold her,” the thief stammered, backing up. “Some of the King’s friends keep nonhumans on their estates as slaves. They use them for cheap labor, sport... or pleasure.”

With a cry, Terrod threw himself at the prisoner, pummeling him with his fists as he cried in rage. This time it was Richter who had to save the man’s life.

“We don’t have time for this,” Richter said. Addressing the thief, “You will die here, now, unless you can help us.”

“There is a ledger,” the thief said. His facial bruises were making his speech slurred. “It is in the chest where we keep our loot. Please let me live.”

“Get on your feet,” Terrod snarled picking the man up by the arm. Turning to Jeremy, he said, “Gather our dead, and lead our people back through the tunnels. Make sure to get Jason and the other wounded to a healer. Be vigilant, but move quickly. Go!” Turning to Richter, he asked, “Will you and your friend stay with me?”

“We finish what we start,” Richter replied. Sion nodded.

“Where are we going?” Terrod asked the thief.

“This way.”

The man walked back towards the stairs and past into the hallway where Richter had suffered his sneak attack. Reminded, he told the thief, “If

you are planning on leading us into a trap, you had better be sure that it kills us all at once, or I will put an arrow through your head. After seeing how you treated those people, it would be a pleasure.”

The thief whimpered, but nodded. They walked down the hallway on edge. The only reassuring fact was that it was narrow enough that sneak attacks could not come from the rear. They reached a large, oaken door which the thief pushed open. Biting his lip, he pointed to the first stone after the door and said, “Don’t step on it.”

Skirting the trap, they followed him into the room and saw a large chest sitting in the middle.

“What’s the catch?” Richter asked.

“I will tell you but on one condition. You have to let me go, and kill the other thief you kept alive. The only way my own gang will not kill me for failure is if they think I was never here. I want your word.”

Terrod moved forward, “I’ll get the answer out of you some other way,” he said, raising his mace.

“Stop,” Richter said. “We don’t have time for this. I swear not to kill you, and will let you deal with the other thief. Tell us how to get the ledger.”

“That entire chest is a decoy. It has a powerful sleep spell bound to it which causes hours of unconsciousness in anyone who touches it. The real

chest is over here.” The thief walked over to a painting and took it down from the wall. Behind it was a chest the size of a microwave. “I don’t know how to open it though, and it weighs an incredible amount.”

“That’s not a problem,” Richter said. Taking off his Bag of Holding, he slipped it over the chest, reducing its apparent weight of three hundred and ten kilos to thirty-one kilograms, well within the tolerance of his strength.

Terrod stared at him, “Will your wonders ever cease?” Walking back, they took care not to trigger the trap, and walked up to the remaining prisoner. Richter handed a dagger to the helpful thief, “I am not here to do your dirty work. Do what you must.”

Taking the dagger, the man slit his former comrade’s throat without hesitation. Seeing Richter’s outstretched hand, he gave the dagger back. They walked down the stairs and back into the tunnel. Richter looked at the thief and asked, “What is your name?”

“I am called Nil.”

“Well Nil, we made a deal, knowledge for service. Your knowledge of the chest for my service of sparing your life. But you still owe me for saving you from him,” indicating Terrod. “He would kill you despite what I agreed to. Now say you owe me for saving your life.”

“I owe you, kind sir.”

“Say it again.”

“I owe you my life, sir!”

“And now say it, one more time,” Richter said, enunciating each and every word.

The thief clearly knew what this meant, but could say little in rebuttal. After seeing the murder and rage in Terrod’s eyes, there was no denying that he owed his survival to Richter. He bowed his head and spread his arms wide. “I owe you, my lord.”

Richter looked the man in the eye and said, “Thrice heard and witnessed.” A prompt reinforced his words.

*Nil has made you a **Vow**. Failure to do so when asked will cause a decrease in his reputation with all beings, and other unknown consequences. Keep in mind, your word means everything!*

“Now run,” Richter said. “I will collect on what you owe me one day.” Nil ran off giving credence to the old saying of vanishing like a thief in the night. Richter, reminded of the state of the refugees they had rescued, could not leave it like this. Casting *Grease I* once more on the room they had just left, he threw Terrod’s torch into the mix and was rewarded by a whoosh of flame as the furniture and walls caught fire. Richter, Sion, Terrod and the man who had been guarding the final thief then turned their backs on both the

light of the fire and the darkness of their deeds, walking on into the gloom of the tunnel.

CHAPTER 22 – Day 44 – Shibon 32, 15,368 ABG



They walked back to the inn without incident, the sky beginning to lighten. While on the way, Richter dealt with the prompts that littered the edge of his vision.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 5 in **Archery**. +10% bonus to aim. +10% bonus to damage.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 4 in **Imbue Arrow**. +20% damage. +20% speed of mana flow.*

*Congratulations! You have advanced to skill level 4 in **Herb Lore**. Herbs are 12% more effective. Increased chance of finding higher level herbs.*

*Congratulations! You have advanced to skill level 2 in **Focus**. Zoom increased by 0.2x.*

*You have proven yourself to be: **Honorable**. You chose to save the life of a comrade rather than eliminate a threat. In a key moment, you chose to honor life rather than pursue death. Be true to yourself to find your specific power. +2 to **Charisma**, 3% decrease in critical strike chance and critical*

strike damage.

The last seemed a bit of a double edged sword, but he was satisfied with the bargain. Richter would never know for sure how important his Charisma was, but since coming to the Kingdom, interacting with others had been of the utmost importance. From meeting Caulder, to Rosy's referral to Terrod, to Leandra selling him the spells that had quite possibly been the deciding factor in the battle with the thieves, his ability to interact with those he had met clearly altered his life here. If he was going to succeed in this new world, he could not do it alone, and he would continue to need help. He would take all of the Charisma he could get.

The next prompt was what really caught his attention.

*Congratulations! You have won +500 **Fame Points**. You have freed those falsely imprisoned; they will spread word of your bravery!*

Total Fame Points: +1200

CHIME!

Congratulations! You have advanced to Reputation Level 2 (Fame +1000).

***"I think I've heard of you."** New quests and opportunities will become available to you!*

*You have completed the Quest: **Fight for those Who Cannot I**. The nonhumans of Yves will now look upon you favorably. Many may decide to*

come to the Mist Village. Bonus Reward: The contents of the thieves' chest.

Reward: 3,500 XP

TRING!

You have reached level 9! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice. Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

Richter was once again faced with the pleasant dilemma of how to allocate his points. The real difficulty with his abilities was that they were almost all mana dependent. His most powerful skill was still Imbue Arrow, and that was a serious drain on his magic points. Many game players liked to specialize in one area. That had never been Richter's style. He liked to have the ability to grow in many directions. His value as a player always came from finding unorthodox solutions to problems through combinations of his skills and abilities. He liked to think that where others saw problems, he thought of solutions. He saw no reason to change his style now. So he put all of his points into the only characteristic he had not directly invested in yet, Wisdom.

Name: Richter

Age: 24

Level: 9, 37%

Health: 256

Mana: 221

Stamina: 160

Strength: 15 (*base: 11 + items: 4*)

Agility: 17

Dexterity: 30 (*base: 19 + items: 11*)

Constitution: 16

Endurance: 16

Intelligence: 19

Wisdom: 18

Charisma: 20

Luck: 14

Abilities:

Limitless

Gift of Tongues

Fast Learner

Skills:

Herb Lore Lvl 4; 11% to next level

Alchemy Lvl 1; 0% to next level

Analyze Lvl 4; 82% to next level

Stealth Lvl 4; 51% to next level

Archery Lvl 5; 17% to next level

Imbue Arrow Lvl 4; 15% to next level

Focus Lvl 2; 6% to next level

Swordsmanship Lvl 1; 88% to next level

Small Blades Lvl 1; 11% to next level

Unarmed Combat Lvl 1; 10% to next level

Pressure Points Lvl 1; 15% to next level

Light Armor Lvl 3; 12% to next level

Air Magic Lvl 3; 38% to next level

Life Magic Lvl 1; 49% to next level

Earth Magic Lvl 1; 46% to next level

Water Magic Lvl 1; 19% to next level

Trade Lvl 1; 11% to next level

Marks:

Master of the Mist Village

Resistances:

Air 50%

Mental 5%

Spiritual 5%

Race: Human (Chaos Seed)

Reputation: Lvl 2 “I think I know that guy!”

Alignment: Neutral

Languages: Common, Sprite

Richter finished with his internal management, and just enjoyed watching the increased regeneration of his mana bar at the corner of his vision for a few seconds. By the time they had arrived at the ladder that led to the alley behind the inn, a fair amount of his mana had recovered. He still felt some aches from his bruises, and walking shot pain into his lower back where he had been stabbed, but it was manageable. These were minor annoyances now, rather than debilitating injuries. The healing abilities in this world were amazing. Even his healing herbs were truly magical. St. John’s Wort, eat your heart out.

“We need to go back to Aldimah’s Focus,” Terrod said once they were back in the inn. “I’m not sure what protections are on that chest, but I would be surprised if there were not both magical and non-magical traps. Killik and Leandra should be able to help. Will you come with me? You convinced the thief to give us the chest. I’ll happily relinquish the contents of the chest, but please let me see the ledger.”

At Richter’s nod, Terrod spent a few moments checking in with all of the former captives. He had apparently not rented out any rooms since the

first trouble with the Night Blades several days prior. He had foreseen that the nonhumans would need a place to stay away from prying eyes until he could get them back out of the city. Richter asked if the gang knew Terrod was involved with getting the nonhumans out of the Kingdom. If so, they would obviously come to the inn looking for retribution. Terrod said the arrangements were made through intermediaries, and his name should not have come up. He still seemed somewhat uncertain though.

Terrod passed on the care of the nonhumans to his staff who assured him that everyone would be fed, given a bath and a place to stay. The wounded were already being cared for and the dead laid by the fire with what were clearly loved ones sobbing over the bodies. Three fighters had given up their lives in the fight. Terrod, Sion, Richter and Jeremy walked out into the night. There wasn't much noise other than their footfalls. Terrod looked at Richter, "Not everyone would have the stomach to kill a man on his knees like that."

Richter answered without looking back. "Where I am from, horrible things happen every single day. No one helps. We even have the ability to know about atrocities on the other side of the planet, but nothing changes. I, personally, was too weak or too scared to do anything about it. I don't like slavers, and that is what you are if you hold an innocent against their will and intend to profit by it. That is what this Kingdom seems to be approaching.

When the Night Blades tried to sell people, they crossed a line. Now that means they were on one side, and I was on the other. I don't regret killing that man. I am happy the world has a bit less evil in it."

"You let the final thief go," Terrod observed. "That Nil, who killed his own man."

"Everyone makes mistakes. Nil's was being part of a group that had partaken in the slave trade. I do not enjoy killing, but as I said, I will not apologize for making the world a better place. Now all three of those men who surrendered were given the chance to make amends. The first was asked twice by you. Then in the most reasonable terms I could manage, I asked him a third time. Now even where I come from, neither god nor man can ask for more than that. So when a man has been given every chance to make amends for a heinous crime, and yet still decides to stand defiant on the wrong side of the line," Richter finally turned to look at Terrod, "I will snatch the soul out his body, and smile right after."

Terrod looked back at him, "I think we understand one another."

They arrived at the magic shop, and Terrod led them around to the back door. He knocked once and then waited. The familiar face of Killik filled the window, and then they heard a bolt being drawn back before he opened the door. They filed into the room with the table Richter had seen

before. Terrod wasted no time. “We took a chest from the Night Blades. We need it opened.”

“Why did you bring us this trouble in the middle of the night?” Killik said heatedly. “You know how hard I work to keep Leandra away from this.”

Terrod took the abuse silently, and then said, “It is the only way to find Isabel.”

“Of course we will help,” Leandra said, coming down the stairs set in the back of the room. “Killik, get your tools. Where is the chest?” The man looked like he might argue, but then changed his mind and did as he was bidden.

“I have it,” Richter said. “Where would you like me to put it?”

“One moment,” she said. She placed both hands over the table, weaving her fingers together. She softly spoke words of Power. There was a blue glow, and a circle inscribed with runes appeared on the table. “Set it here.”

Richter retrieved the chest and placed it on the table.

Killik returned with a leather bound item. Unrolling it next to the chest, various metal implements could be seen, each in its own specific place. He looked at the four of them, “Just stand back, and let us work.”

Killik and Leandra huddled around the chest murmuring to each

other. They circled it several times planning their avenue of attack. A lot more than several times actually. The next thing Richter knew, he was being shaken awake from the chair where he had sat while waiting. Sunlight streamed through the window, and the sounds of foot traffic could be heard through a partially open window. He also heard a dog barking and smelled tea being brewed somewhere in the shop. These were all innocuous events that occurred, and were in turn ignored, each and every morning. This morning, however, they were remarkable to Richter, in that their very banality stood in stark contrast to the blood spilled and lives lost the night before.

His attention was quickly pulled to what was in front of him. The chest lay on the table with the lid ajar. Leandra and Killik sat nearby looking drained. “That thing was a nightmare. You’re lucky you brought it to us,” Killik said.

“That bad?” Richter asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Well not bad if you would have enjoyed your blood boiling and parts of your body sloughing off, namely your c-”

“Leandra,” Killik interrupted sharply. Looking back at Richter, “Point is the chest is open now. We will let you handle your business. I only did this for Isabel. Come, Leandra. We are going to leave them to it.”

The young mage complained, but Killik was hearing none of it. He herded her out to the front of the store and out of sight.

“Who is Isabel?” Richter asked.

Terrod paused on his way to open the chest, “A wonderful woman. A wood elf. She is... precious to me,” his voice catching at the end. Richter now understood Terrod’s passion to free the nonhumans. Terrod opened the lid and set it back on the table. The chest was less than half full. Several vials were on top that he placed to the side. Underneath was a thin book bound in brown leather. Terrod took the book and began to go through it page by page, the other contents of the chest already forgotten. Sion moved to the vials, examining them, leaving Richter to examine the rest of the contents of the chest. The first thing he saw was a gilded dagger in a sheath that looked like a faceted crystal.

You have found:
Glass Dagger

Damage: 14-17
Durability: 250/250
Item Class: Uncommon
Quality: Superb
Weight: 0.2 kg.

The dagger was almost ridiculously light, but the edge seemed wickedly sharp. The blade was made of the same clear material that the sheath was made of. When he turned the dagger he could see through it with

no issue, though it refracted light extremely well and made a rainbow of intense hues on the far wall. Turned on the other axis, the thin blade seemed to almost disappear. Setting it to the side, he looked at the rest of the chest. There was a jumble of copper, silver, and gold coins, with some random jewels. He had a thought and just poured the content into his bag.

Gotta love that auto sort. It looked like there had been roughly two hundred copper coins, thirty silver and ten gold coins. Seven stones of varying types made their way into his inventory as well. There were also two rings that glowed slightly. They just appeared as “Magic Rings.” He would have to see if Leandra could identify them. At the bottom of the chest was a necklace and a book. The familiar and frustrating prompt, “Magic necklace and Magic Book,” greeted him when attempting to examine them. He had to find a way to identify items himself.

Sion held up the bottles one by one. “Frost resistance, Fire resistance, Healing, Mana replacement.” He paused before lifting the last. Richter examined it, “Magic Potion,” appeared on the prompt. Nodding understandingly at Sion, he reached out his hand and placed it in his bag. The first four could prove useful in the coming days. Terrod was still pouring over the ledger, and so Richter walked up front. Leandra was standing behind the counter, and that gorgeous smile was on her face when she saw him.

Smiling back, still a bit awestruck by the beautiful creature in front of

him, he asked, “There are a few items I can’t identify. Can you help?”

“I have an identify spell, and I also have a reasonable amount of Lore. I can look if you like.”

Richter looked slightly confused, “What is Lore?”

“Oh, well there are two main ways to identify something. Magic is the most common way, either with ability, spell, scroll or item. Identification items are rare though. The other way is to have studied enough about magic that you can recognize some or all of an item’s properties. I have level three in my Lore skill which should work for most basic items. Now let me see what you have,” she said with a small laugh.

Richter handed her the rings, necklace, book and vial. She looked over the necklace, running her hands along it, closing and opening her eyes slowly, seemingly lost in thought. After a minute she smiled and reached out her hand. He took it and she placed it over hers with the necklace between them.

You have found:
Necklace of Scry Defense

Durability: 200/200
Item Class: Rare
Quality: Exquisite
Weight: 0.4 kg
Traits: Will block all but the most powerful scrying spells. You will not be able to be seen by divination, identification, tracking or detection spells. Passive ability.

This might be the most impressive item he had found besides the Magic Core! Right now he was a small fish as far as this world was concerned, but if he kept making waves like, say, attacking an established underworld guild, it was probably a good idea to protect himself from those who might look for retribution.

Leandra removed her hand, a little slower than she needed to in Richter's happy opinion. She repeated the process with both rings, one at a time.

You have found: Ring of Hidden Dangers	Durability: 15/15 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +16% to trap detection
You have found: Dungeon Ring	Durability: 20/20 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Will open most basic locks and some magical locks. Can be used twice per day

Both could come in handy. It was too bad Jason hadn't been wearing the first ring when they attacked the thieves. Leandra picked up the book and went through the same motions as before. Frowning, she set it back down and

focused. A familiar white light came from her hands. After a minute though, she shook her head, “I’m sorry Richter, my Lore level isn’t high enough for this, and it is resisting my identify spell. On the plus side though, it probably means it is very valuable.” She handed the book back to him.

Picking up the small vial, she immediately gave a small gasp. “I know what this is. It’s a Potion of Clarity. I have seen one before, and it had the same clear water with little motes of light inside. This is valuable, Richter!”

Somewhat taken aback, he asked, “How valuable?”

“It depends on how much the experience bonus is and how long it will last for. The potion I saw increased experience by 15% for twelve hours and it was selling for one gold.”

“So how much do you think a potion that increased experience by 25% for a day would sell for?”

“Oh at least three gold. That would be almost impossible to find though. I don’t know all the ingredients to make the potion, but I know they are all difficult to obtain and expensive. Why do you ask?”

A slow and small smile grew on Richter’s face. Changing the subject, he asked, “Can you teach me your Lore skill?”

“No, but I do have copies of a few of the books I used to obtain it. I can sell them to you if you like.”

Richter said yes and thanked her. She left to go get them out of her room, and he spent the time she was gone perusing her shop. He had noticed a mortar and pestle when leaving last time. Moving around he saw that they had extensive amounts of magical ingredients, alchemy sets, mortars and pestles, measuring spoons and any number of other implements required to pursue the magical arts. Behind a glass cabinet were various types of potions. There was also a small library dealing with herbology, alchemy and a list of other subjects. Each item was clearly marked, and it was somewhat surprising that there were different grades of alchemical equipment ranging from average to superb. Richter assumed that the equipment ranged from trash to masterwork, just like his other equipment. From what he had seen of the determined man, though, Killik would not allow trash or poor quality inventory into his shop, and he probably simply didn't have access to exquisite or masterwork items. That might be all for the best, for while a low quality novice level alchemy set cost a few silvers, the superb quality novice set was ten gold. Initiate and apprentice ranked alchemy sets were insanely expensive.

He picked a few healing herbs, and resolved to discuss the price of the other items with Leandra or Killik. As bright and sunny as the girl was, she had been no less difficult a negotiator than Killik during their first bargaining experience. He was convinced that her personal desire for the staff was a

large reason as to why he had gotten such a good deal on his spells.

Leandra came back to the front room carrying two thick books. They said History of Magic I and II respectively, “I’m warning you now, they can be pretty boring at times, but they got me to Lore level 2. Unfortunately, I do not have the third book, but there are others that can increase your Lore as well.”

“I’d like all of the other books you have out here as well. I need an alchemy set and a way to transport it. Some healing, mana and stamina potions. Sion will pick all of the ingredients he needs for potion making and any herbs he needs. Oh, and all of your empty vials. I think I’ll have a lot of things to sell soon,” he said, grinning again.

After talking to Leandra, Richter decided to get the superb quality set of apprentice alchemy equipment. Higher ranked alchemy sets were apparently needed to make higher level potions and better quality sets created potions of increased potency. He had always believed in paying a bit more on the front end, rather than being nicked-and-dimed to death later on. It also wouldn’t be a small thing to get back to the city if he needed an upgrade. Once he was back in the Mist Village, he was pretty much stuck with whatever he brought back until he could spare another few weeks and make it back into the Kingdom. Luckily, she had hundreds of empty vials that he was able to bargain down to one vial per copper piece in light of the large amount

he was buying.

The books were almost ridiculously expensive to Richter's mind. They ranged from three silvers to two gold pieces each. He supposed it made sense though. On Earth, before the printing press, only priests or nobles had access to books or even had the ability to read. He was insanely thankful that his Gift of Tongues extended to the written word. Knowledge was power in any world it seemed, and so he paid with minimal grumbling.

When the ingredients Sion chose were added to the mix along with a few modest healing and mana potions, he ended up agreeing to pay about fifteen gold pieces. That amount brought a smile even to Killik's face. That smile reverted back to his customary scowl when Richter told him about the 10% discount Leandra had agreed to before, to which she just smiled sheepishly. That change in expression almost made the cost of everything worthwhile to Richter. Leandra and Killik packaged his purchases and he went back to check on Terrod.

Richter could see that things were not going great. A look of frustration was on Terrod's face. "Gah! They have written this in some code. I can only make out bits and pieces. I will need help to figure out the book. I can't stand these delays." He visibly composed himself, and then looked at Richter. "I will need time and the help of wiser minds than my own to read this, but I will find the other captives. I will find Isabel! I don't have the right

to ask this, but when I find where she is, will you help me? Either way, I will fulfill my bargain to speak on your behalf to any that would join you. But,” and his voice broke a bit, “I have to save her.”

*You have been offered a Quest: **Fight for those who Cannot II**. Isabel remains missing, and Terrod is overcome with grief. He is placing all of his hope on the chance that this ledger will provide her location. He is asking for your help once he finds out where she is. Reward: Increased relationship with Terrod. Yes or No?*

“I will help you,” Richter said. This wasn’t just about getting people for his village anymore. This was his new life, and he wouldn’t just stand by when horrible things were being done. He would help if he could.

Terrod is in a vulnerable position, heartsick with worry, and he has reached out for your help. You did not disappoint. He knows that actions speak louder than words, and appreciates you standing with him.

*Congratulations! You have gained **+1,142 Relationship Points** with **Terrod**! Your relationship with the **Terrod** has improved from **Neutral (0)** to **Friendly (+1,000)**. “It has been too long since we have seen each other”*

*Total Relationship Points with the **Terrod**: **+1,264***

That was a little strange, getting his reward before he finished the quest, but okay, Richter thought.

Terrod heaved a sigh of relief. “I need to get some sleep. I was not able to rest waiting for them to open that chest. I will head back to the inn and set up a meeting with you and some prominent nonhumans that might be interested in coming to your village. I won’t be able to get them together until nightfall, though.”

Terrod started toward the door, but then turned back, “You should know that it is not only nonhumans that have had trouble fitting into the Kingdom recently. Many human men and women are struggling to provide food and the basic necessities for themselves as well. There is a building in the Grand Market where journeymen often went in days past. They could be found there by those who needed their services. These days, many humans congregate in the Grand Market every day from all different types of professions and walks of life, just looking for a few coins. If you aren’t too exhausted, you could stop by the market first before coming back to the inn. I have to warn you, though, the difficulties of their lives have made some extremely bitter and hateful towards nonhumans. Be careful who you invite to join your village. You’ll find the Grand Market on the western side of the city halfway up hill.”

Nodding thanks for the information, Richter said, “I appreciate your counsel, Terrod. I will check out this Grand Market. First, I need a moment, though.” Terrod nodded back and Richter walked back to the front of the

store. He reached into his bag, and then placed his hand on the counter in front of Leandra. She looked at him with a half-smile and a curious expression. Her infectious grin brought one to his face as well. Trying not to blush he said, "I wanted to say thank you for all of your help. What you taught me saved our lives last night. I hope that I see you again very soon, but I was wondering if you could do me a favor until then and hold onto something for me." He nodded his head toward the hand he placed on the counter.

She leaned over, and he slowly peeled his hand away. He looked underneath his hand as if to ensure what was there before moving quickly to reveal there had been nothing there in the first place. But her focus and distraction let him grab her other hand and place a beautiful opal in her palm. She gasped and gave a small shriek when she saw the iridescent colors play over its white surface. Throwing her hands around his neck she gave him a big hug, and he realized that he couldn't have found a better use for the jewel.

The beautiful elf Leandra has been moved by your gift. Her kind spirit already moved her to treat you with kindness and friendship, but your generous gift has now brought a smile to her heart. She may be more receptive to you in the future in various ways.

*Congratulations! You have gained **+4,567 Relationship Points** with **Leandra!***

*Your relationship with the **Leandra** has improved from **Friendly (+1,000)** to **Interested (+5000)**. “You intrigue me, I was thinking that we could...”*

*Total Relationship Points with the **Leandra**: **+5,835***

***Charisma** has increased by +1.*

The moment would have been perfect if not for Killik’s glower. The man’s gaze threatened all manner of tortures if Richter didn’t let go quickly. The chaos seed gave a small cough and stepped back, retreating out of the door with Terrod and Sion. While he walked through, he was still thinking of the way Leandra had somehow smelled like caramel.

CHAPTER 23 – Day 44 – Shibon 32, 15,368 ABG



They followed Terrod's directions to the western side of the city. They heard the Grand Market well before they saw it. Even this early in the day, a bustle of activity could be heard sounding like the drone of an enormous beehive and evolving into the shouted voices of hundreds and then thousands of people. They turned a final corner and were confronted with a sea of tents and stands. The street they were walking on sloped down as it entered the Market and so they had a clear view of the countless vendors extending out in front of them. There was no uniformity to be seen. Pointed or flat-topped, beige or a riotous collage of colors, the tents that comprised the bazaar did not follow any recognizable pattern. Some were as large as a house and others so small it didn't seem that they could fit a person inside.

Terrod had told them that the building they were looking for was at the center of the Market. The two friends began walking and melded with the chaos of people squeezing down narrow corridors between the tents. It was an assault on the senses, almost overwhelming. It made Richter glad that no one else could access his valuables in his Bag of Holding, because this setting

must be a pickpocket's wet dream.

Many sights grabbed Richter's attention, from food, to weapons, to exotic animals in cages. Even the people were varied in their speech, skin color and style of dress. Richter had wondered why his darker skin color had not raised any eyebrows in the fair skinned humans he had met, but he saw plenty in the Market that could represent every race on Earth and also people who wouldn't fit any category he was familiar with. There was even a fairly large amount of nonhumans. Every tent did have at least one human, but in the Market the nonhumans at least stood tall and made eye contact.

The one place Richter did linger was a book seller, but the "magic books" they offered were less than genuine. The prompt that appeared when Richter examined them showed they were only normal books. The merchant tried to tell him that the magic had to be earned, but Richter deduced the books were merely traps to separate the gullible from their money. He decided to just press on, glancing back from time to time to make sure he hadn't lost Sion. Somehow he didn't think the sprite would appreciate a suggestion to hold his hand.

Two hours passed before they saw the columned building that Terrod had described. It wasn't just that the Market was large enough to require that amount of time, even though it *was* massive. Their slow pace had more to do with the press of people and the arrangement of the tents. It was a maze.

Several times they had walked into a dead end and had to backtrack. One time, only a grim glare coupled with the fact that their hands were firmly on their weapons had backed down a pair of men that had clearly meant them harm. They did see occasional pairs of soldiers walking, but they were few and far between. It didn't escape Richter's notice that most vendors had at least daggers at their belts, and that the larger tents had burly men looking over anyone that came close. The only real benefit of walking through the Market was that Richter got ample opportunity to use *Analyze*. Despite this opportunity, he grew impatient and Richter finally grabbed an urchin who agreed to lead them to the building for a few coppers. Half an hour later their destination was in sight. Their guide told them the building was an old converted temple, though no one remembered what deity it had once been dedicated to. The locals simply called it the Hall.

With an abrupt transition the tents stopped, and a large arena of paved stones opened in front of them. Tents could be seen lining the edges of a rectangular area about the size of two football fields placed end to end. The small girl leading them pointed to one end of the open space and then disappeared back into the morass of tents. Richter wondered if her whole life had been spent inside of that canvas expanse. Dismissing it from his mind, they walked towards the Hall, enjoying the relative freedom of personal space for the first time in what felt like a great while, though it had actually only

been a few hours. Fountains and statues in various states of disrepair dotted the space as did small clusters of trees. Quartets of guards lounged at the edges periodically, presumably to be able to react to trouble quickly in any direction.

The density of people increased as they neared the Hall. There seemed to be some loose organization to the workers standing around; people of similar builds and clothes lounged together. The Companions walked up the steps and the relative quiet they had enjoyed outside in the plaza was replaced by the sound of many voices. Richter looked at the packed masses of people and quailed. Terrod had told them there was only one person that he trusted in the Hall. They would just have to search for her.

The inside of the Hall was set up in a series of small platforms that the “agents” stood upon. The potential employers spoke to the agents who then led them to the appropriate workers. Along the walls there were more agents. They were apparently more important and warranted small booths and desks.

Terrod had told them that being an agent was a thriving business. Apparently everyone seeking employment had to register with an agent. The practice had been around so long now that it had been formalized by the Kingdom. Each agent was licensed and there was a finite amount of licenses at any one time. Anyone masquerading as an agent, or any worker trying to get employment without going through proper channels, would earn

themselves a beating or imprisonment. The guards present in the building certainly seemed more alert than those outside. The one thing that worked in Richter's favor was that there were only a limited number of agents. They found the woman they were looking for rather quickly, only needing to ask for directions twice. Terrod had referred to her as "Mama."

Mama turned out to be a five foot nothing ball of fury. She gave orders and her voice was like the crack of a whip, moving business along with the efficiency of a drummer on a Roman war galley. There was a clear protocol. The area in front of her booth lacked the milling chaos that characterized the rest of the building. Her customers had formed an orderly line with a person moving up, handing over a piece of paper, and saying what they needed. A short conversation about the specifics of the contract then ensued. Afterward, she would gesture to one of her several aides that stood nearby. Coins would exchange hands, then the aide and customer would walk off, presumably to retrieve whatever help the customer had come to obtain.

Somewhat at a loss, but not wanting to rock the boat, Richter and Sion joined the line. In what seemed like no time they were at the front and her hand was out, while looking down and writing the details of the last transaction in an open book in front of her. When nothing landed in her hand, she looked up with complete and utter disdain, searching for and finding the moron who had brought disorder to her carefully cultivated universe. Richter

could swear he heard the people behind him backing up to show they were not with him, but he didn't dare look away from the woman before him.

“When my hand is out, I expect your reference to be placed in it. I do not work with people I do not know. I have found it to be a waste of my time. I do not like wasting my time. I do not like people that waste my time. Now you are just standing there looking indecisive. Indecision causes confusion. Confusion causes accidents. Accidents cause death! So before my mental anguish transforms into your physical anguish, why don't you get out of my line!” Each word of her speech dripped venom, and rose in volume, until she was shouting at the end. This time Richter was sure everyone had moved away from him. And yes, he meant everyone. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Sion standing a good three feet away.

Blushing from the embarrassment of being dressed down like a child, he said, “Terrod sent us. He told us you were the person we should trust.”

Her face twitched as she digested this information. Her mouth opened and she continued in the same tone, but with perhaps a touch less volume, “And why should I trust that? Why should I trust you?”

Richter's mind searched frantically before latching onto Terrod's last statement, said over his shoulder as he walked away. Richter repeated it now. “He said to remember I should never lie to Mama.”

Her face twitched again, and this time the left corner of her mouth turned up right before she broke into a large smile, “And how is Mr. Tall, Dark and Brooding?”

“He told me to convey his regards and apologies that he has not seen you recently. He is helping me with certain arrangements, but he told me that in addition to his, ahem, unique resources, that you might be able to help me as well.”

“Well that is likely true enough,” she said loudly. The smile left her face and her sharp business tone came out again, “but I will not know until you stop standing there like idiots and tell me what you need.”

“I need good people to live in, work in and grow my village. I am willing to pay a fair wage, and anyone that can open and maintain a business can keep the fruits of their labor as long as they pay a tax and also contribute to the overall defense and productivity of the village. I have heard that many talented people are going to waste here. I am willing to give them a home.”

“Okay that’s the cream, now what’s the curdle? And don’t try to sell me a sky of sunshine and the promise of no rain. Listen to the advice you got, you do not want to lie to Mama.”

This woman was tough. Taking a deep breath, Richter replied, “It’s in the Forest of Nadria. It has many resources but no infrastructure yet. We

would be building from the ground up. I also would need anyone that came to agree to leave the Kingdom for at least one whole year. Security matters to me, but I promise that anyone who wants to leave after a year, I will see safely back to the town of Leaf's Crossing."

"You ask a lot," she said, staring at him. "I need to think this over. If you can wait, you can rest over there while I conduct my business with the rest of these good people. We will talk when I'm done."

Nodding agreement, Richter walked to the area she indicated on the side of her booth. He sat down on the floor, and Sion sat next to him. "Oh so now you don't mind being near me? That was a dick move man," he said to the sprite. Sion simply gave a shrug and sat in the lotus position with his bow across his legs. Richter was pretty sure the little man had fallen asleep, and fought an irrational urge to give him a wet willie. Instead he leaned his back against the wall and waited. And waited. And waited. It was well past noon when the line of employers dwindled off. Richter had wanted to leave several times, but had stayed out of a mixture of respect for Terrod's opinion, desire to have the best for his village, and honestly having nothing better to do.

When she finished with her last client, Mama placed a placard with a red "X" on her desk facing out and stood up. She motioned for Richter to follow her outside, and he nudged Sion, who annoyingly had been snoring softly for the past couple hours.

When they were outside on a terrace that ran around the three quarters of the building not facing the promenade, she started talking. “I did not expect you to wait. It takes a lot for someone to sit on a stone floor with no real promise of obtaining what they desire. It normally takes either desperation or dedication. You do not seem overly desperate to me.” They kept walking around, looking at the masses of people on the ground to the sides of the building.

“Did Terrod tell you why they call me Mama? I’m guessing no, as he didn’t give you a written referral, despite knowing that is how I do things. Tell him he will get a slap on the head for that down the line, by the way. They call me Mama, because I care about the people I represent. Every man or woman that gets a contract through me is paid and treated fairly. If there is ever an issue I make sure my people are taken care of, and then I deal with anyone that would cheat me and mine.” She looked meaningfully at Richter. He nodded back, not speaking but with a serious expression.

Satisfied, she continued, “Now because of this my workers apply themselves and work harder than others which makes the employers happy. Both the employers and the workers know that I only deal with solid and dependable people. That is why Terrod sent you to me. Now while I am not able to do as much as I would like for many people, I also do not make a practice of placing the wellbeing of my charges in the hands of someone I

don't know."

Richter's expression must have fallen a bit because she sharply said, "Pay attention! I said normally. You may be a special case. There are a few things in your favor. One," she held up her closed fist, extending her forefinger, "you showed patience this morning. Two," another finger went up, "Terrod sent you. If that old warhorse vouches for you it means a lot. Three, there is something about you that makes me want to trust you. That doesn't often happen. Now, while those three things might make me want to buy you an ale and see how firm that toosh is, they wouldn't bring me to entrust the wellbeing of any of my workers with you. While you were waiting though, I had some people ask about you. There is a rumor that a particularly loathsome gang by the docks was attacked and had a good portion of their members wiped out. During this bloodbath, some nonhuman captives were freed. No one is quite sure who did it, but a close friend of mine confided that his brother's friend's girlfriend's long lost schoolmate, or some such rubbish, had been part of the raid, and that there was a curious late addition of a man and a sprite. Now you would not know anything about that would you?" By the time she related the last points, they had walked to a secluded part of the terrace where there was no one to eavesdrop.

Richter looked at her. He was somewhat alarmed that she had made the connection so easily. Not for any direct concern that she meant him ill,

but that it raised the real possibility that the remaining gang members could find him and the others. True, she apparently knew Terrod well and he had said he trusted her implicitly, so it would be easier for her to connect the dots than someone outside of Terrod's immediate circle, but it was disquieting nonetheless. It made him anxious to conclude his business in the city and get back to the Forest. Despite his discomfort though, Richter still needed help, and Terrod had vouched for this woman. How could Richter ask her to trust him if he was not willing to do the same?

“I am sure that you understand the dangers of your question, for me, Terrod or anyone else involved. I am equally sure that it's not necessary for me to stress how important it is to be discreet, but I will anyway. That being said, yes, I was a part of the raid to free the nonhumans. We succeeded, but unfortunately lost some men along the way. We also did not free all of them as some had been sold as slaves to various nobles. We don't know who yet, but Terrod has a ledger that we were told can point us to those that were involved. The ledger was encoded, so he is working now to figure it out. When he does, we are going to help him get the missing back. Specifically, Isabel.”

She listened closely while he related his story; when he mentioned Isabel though, her face broke with shock. “Isabel is missing? He tried to smuggle her out of the city? The fool! I told him not to trust those shifty

Night Blades.” She stared out over the promenade for several minutes.

“Okay. I understand why Terrod trusts you now. I have decided to help you. Now have you given thought to the type of people you need?”

“I was thinking masons, carpenters, farmers for crops and livestock, and guards.”

“That’s it? That’s all you think is required to grow a village? How will you feed them while you wait for crops to grow? You will need hunters and fishermen. How will you clothe them when the seasons grow cold? You need weavers to make those clothes. How will you help those who get ill or injured? You will need a healer. There is more to a community than just buildings and defense.”

A host of responses went through Richter’s head, but he ultimately decided on, “Will you help me?”

A smile replaced her stern expression, “That is what Mama is for.”

They went over the specifics for several more hours. Afterwards, she promised to speak to her workers and find out who would be interested. When she told him the weekly wages most lived on, he was shocked. These people were just being blatantly taken advantage of. She agreed it was well below what each was worth, but seemed resigned that this was now the way of the world. Richter told her that anyone that he decided to take with him

would be paid the basic wage of four silvers per fortnight, and he would cover room and board for the first year. This brought another smile to her face and she assured him it would make it easier to convince people to leave Law. They moved onto other topics.

The first was that the workers had families, and she needed to know if they could come as well. Since Richter was planning to grow his community, it seemed well in line with his goals and he readily agreed. The next topic was how to get people there. Trekking a large amount of people through rugged terrain with the possibility of animal or monster attacks was daunting. He would have to hire a large amount of guards. The other option though was to use the river ways. Buying several boats was not feasible, but renting a few river craft while expensive was manageable. It would also let him transport needed items like anvils and the core components for a smelter to his village. Even though he was getting excited about the increased possibilities, the costs he had not foreseen were becoming daunting. He was relieved again that he had found the chest of jewels. Without their capital, reviving his new home might have been an insurmountable task.

The conversation continued to evolve to topics ranging from hiring a shipwright, needing shovels and other tools, and investing in a new stationary buzz saw that could be powered by the river to greatly increase productivity (he hedged off the last one; what were Mist Workers for if not hard labor). At

the end of their talk, Mama had a list of items that should be obtained and categorized them as necessary, beneficial, or simply desired. Richter had told her that he had worked with Hafiz before. She said she knew him and agreed he was a good choice for obtaining what was needed. She also said that by tomorrow there would be a strong list of candidates to join him. With a final thank you, Richter and Sion left and made their way back to the Laughing Imp.

Several men lounged in front of the inn. It didn't look like anything special to the untrained eye, but one casually got up to meet them and the other three tensed. "Inn is closed today, friend."

"I'm here for a meeting. I helped Terrod secure the precious cargo inside. Get him."

The man still stood in front of Richter, but sent one of his fellows inside. Terrod came out soon after and waved him inside. The mood of the former captives was much improved as they sat in small groups and talked, smiling. It was amazing what being clean, warm and fed could do for your attitude. He followed Terrod to a back table that had five older nonhumans, two dwarves, two elves and a small humanoid that Richter couldn't identify. He then used *Analyze* on all of them and found out their exact races: a mountain dwarf, hill dwarf, wood elf, high elf, and a builder gnome. More importantly though was the prompt that he was awarded.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 5 in **Analyze**. In addition to the information you already receive, you will also be provided with basic information of the target's race, the target's name and the target's disposition towards you.*

Curious, he quickly used his ability again on everyone present.

Name: **Terrod**. Human: Lvl 6. Health 170. Mana 120. Stamina 160.

Disposition: Friendly. Humans are one of the shortest lived, but most prolific breeders in the Land. Humans have a broader affinity for skills than other races. No special bonuses to race. Humans get four points to distribute per level.

Name: **Sion**. Wood Sprite Lvl 9. Health 210. Mana 190. Stamina 120.

Disposition: Ally. Sprites have several subclasses which determine their specific powers. Wood Sprites are naturally gifted in tracking and woodcraft. They have a skill of imbuing their strikes with mana, greatly increasing damage. Wood Sprites get three points to distribute per level, and each level gives +2 to Dexterity.

Name: **Hilda**. Mountain Dwarf Level 10. Health 240. Mana 120. Stamina 260. Disposition: Friendly. Dwarves have several subclasses that

determine their specific powers. Mountain Dwarves are a hardy folk that get bonuses to Constitution and Endurance each level. They have keen eyesight that gives them excellent night vision. Natural miners, it is said mountain dwarves can “smell” veins of precious metals. Increased resistance to negative physical effects. Increased affinity and resistance to Earth Magic. Mountain Dwarves get three points to distribute per level, and each level gives +1 to Constitution and +1 to Endurance.

Name: **Poltan**. Hill Dwarf Level 8. Health 250. Mana 130. Stamina 210.
Disposition: Friendly. Dwarves have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. Hill Dwarves are the most social of the dwarven races. Highly skilled in crafting. One of the few dwarf races known to be skilled in ranged combat. Increased resistance to negative physical effects. Increased affinity and resistance to Earth Magic. Hill Dwarves get three points to distribute per level, and each level gives +1 to Constitution and +1 to Endurance.

Name: **Ulin**. Wood Elf Level 10. Health 170. Mana 260. Stamina 110.
Disposition: Friendly. Elves have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. Wood Elves are gifted in archery, woodcraft, and healing. Increased accuracy and damage when using ranged weapons. Bonus to

dodge. Wood Elves get three points to distribute per level, and each level gives +1 to Dexterity and +1 to Intelligence.

Name: **Wisteria**. High Elf Level 12. Health 130. Mana 300. Stamina 110. Disposition: Friendly. Elves have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. High Elves are gifted in archery and most magical arts. They have increased resistance to magical attack. Bonus to Intelligence and Wisdom each level. High Elves get three points to distribute per level, and each level gives +1 to Intelligence and +1 to Wisdom.

Name: **Berin**. Builder Gnome Level 9. Health 140. Mana 190. Stamina 210. Disposition: Friendly. Gnomes have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. Builder Gnomes are obsessed with the application of knowledge. Known to make amazing devices and build fantastic structures. Gifted in magical crafting. Builder Gnomes get three points to distribute per level, and each level gives +1 to Intelligence and +1 to Endurance.

Richter had noticed before that using Analyze on different races created different prompts. Using it on multiple races at once really drove the difference home though. While that was anecdotally interesting, it was also

pleasant to see how they all viewed him. Not overly surprising though, considering the role he had played in freeing their people. Well no reason not to grease the wheels. Looking at each in turn, he willed himself to speak their native languages. All had surprised looks that only grew as they observed his apparent mastery of multiple tongues.

Terrod and Sion sat, but Richter remained standing. He had given some thought to how he would address them. He decided to maintain his customary tack of honesty and strength. Switching to the common tongue, “I am Master of a village and a Place of Power. I need help to grow the village into something good, something to be proud of. When I came to this Kingdom, I thought that only meant getting people with skills to grow the physical village, raise crops, and erect walls. I don’t believe that any longer.

“ I could give you many reasons why coming to my village is the smart thing to do, but only you can truly know that. Only you have lived through the past years of oppression in this kingdom. Only you know how it has affected your lives, your livelihoods, and your families. Only you can make a simple decision. Do you continue to live here being forced to kneel, or do you take a chance to come with me and stand on the merits of your own skills and hard work? I make no promises for the future, but I do promise that if you come with me, we will meet it together.”

Richter sat down. No one spoke for a moment. They simply watched

each other. He was pleased with what he saw. No doubt there would be more work to fully convince them, but from the nods and speculative looks on their faces, he was confident the Mist Village was about to have dozens of more residents. It was good to be the king of Charisma.

They all agreed to come with him in the end, and had already spoken to their people. Richter now had dwarven smiths and crafters, elvish hunters and healers, and gnomish builders and farmers. There was even an elvish shipwright and her apprentices. Each race had a smattering of fighters and casters of various types as well. All told including families, wives, husbands and children, one hundred and eighty-two souls agreed to come with him. The topic of wages came up and he interrupted them in the middle of their proposal. He refused to pay the wage they would have made in the Kingdom, and instead promised to pay the wage their human counterparts would have made for the same work. Richter had already resolved he would not sow the seeds of discord and disharmony in the early days of his new community. He made it clear that all would be treated equally. Tears welled in several eyes at that, and the gnome freely shed a few tears and reached out to shake his hand. Richter merely nodded in response, and further told them that for the first year as they built the village he would also provide free room and board. They in turn would help to grow the village, protect it as needed and respect his position as Master of the village. He was also firm on the point that all

would help each other advance their skills. Richter planned to have a skilled population that was versatile. There was no dissension.

That only left the problem of getting them out of the Kingdom. Thankfully this was not the insurmountable problem that Richter had feared it to be. Terrod had the solution. The original plan had been to smuggle the nonhumans into the Kingdom of Rione, which did not distinguish between the races in how they treated their citizens. Terrod had hired the thieves to shelter the nonhumans so they could slowly move small groups of them through Rald's Pass, the only well-traveled and safe passage through the Serrated Mountains. It was the only direct way into Rione, as no rivers large enough to carry ships connected the two Kingdoms. Incidentally this was also why Rione had not been annexed by the Kingdom of Yves long ago.

Now that the ultimate destination was the Forest of Nadria, different possibilities were open to them. The Undine River, the apparent name of the major waterway that ran behind Law, connected to the Forest of Nadria as Richter well knew. They could hide the nonhumans on river barges taking them past Leaf's Crossing and into the forest. From there, Richter could guide them among the forest's many tributaries until they were only a few miles from the village. He and several others that he would grant immunity to the mists would then guide them to the village and later back out. The basic location of the village might be known by a few ship captains, but nothing

specific would get back to anyone in the Kingdom.

Richter was acutely aware that the greatest defense of his village was its obscure location. Taking the ships to the village was the only option though. Despite his need for caution, he had not forgotten the dangers of the forest or his encounter with the troll on the way out. Taking a host of defenseless children and non-fighters over hundreds of miles of wooded terrain would be inviting slaughter. It was these very dangers that had led Terrod and the others to reject the Forest of Nadria, or any of the other neighboring lands, initially. The Silent Hills, the Whisper Woods, the Plains of Gold, all of them could be reached by river. They were all populated with monsters or hostile tribes though. It was only because Richter had found and created a safe haven that the forest was now a viable option.

It would take several days to arrange the transport, collect the families, and bribe the ship captains, but Terrod was confident he could do it. In the meantime, each of the five leaders worked with Richter to make a list of the materials they would be needing for their various peoples. Some of it was minor, such as seeds for planting. Other items could be made once there, like nails, boards, shovels, and plows. Some were already owned like a jeweler's tools. Some had to be bought however, like the smelter components for the blacksmiths. Many of the requests had already been covered during his talk with Mama.

The gnome also brought up that if he wanted livestock, he would have to arrange for that to be bought and shipped. Ideally everything would be waiting to be picked up in Leaf's Crossing by the time they got there. He had several hundred gold in hard currency, the jewels he had obtained from the thieves plus the lion's share of the jewels from the treasury. It was time to see Hafiz again. He had only gotten a few hours of sleep in the last two days though, and just the thought of all the money he was about to spend was exhausting. He said goodnight and walked up to his room, falling into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 24 – Day 45 – Shibon 33, 15,368 ABG



Richter woke early with the dawn. He decided to leave Sion sleeping and made his way downstairs after gathering his bag and weapons. A half-asleep barmaid gave him a biscuit to break his fast. Thanking her, he grabbed one more, and walked outside, eating on the move. Bleh! This tasted like it was barely made with any lard at all. His grandmother wouldn't have fed this to the dogs. Sigh. He had so much to add to this world. On the plus side, the sky was clear. There was still moisture on the pavestones from the cool night before. Though the sun was rising, two moons could still be seen low in the sky. He walked at an unhurried pace. As he made his way, it occurred to him that this was one of his only moments of solitude since waking in The Land. It was, he reflected, a beautiful morning.

Hafiz's shop was still locked when Richter arrived. A round of vigorous knocking brought a sleepy and annoyed face to the window. Holding up the biscuit bribe, Richter gave his most winning smile. Hafiz didn't seem impressed, but unlocked the door anyway. The disheveled man bowed his head, "What can your most humble servant do for you," he asked,

clearly irritated.

“Just how many Potions of Clarity could you sell per month? Each lasts a full day and gives a 25% bonus to experience.”

Hafiz lifted his head, a large wolf-like smile slowly growing on his face.

Huh, Richter thought, if that's the way I look it *is* kinda creepy.

The two men haggled good-naturedly for about an hour. It was clear that the negotiations were more about a shared enjoyment of the art of bargaining than a need to one-up each other. With his high Charisma and the promise of future profits, Richter ended up paying with half of his gold and about a third of his remaining gemstones, but he was able to get all of the items he and Mama had come up with. He also bought enough grain and foodstuffs to ensure that his people could eat for four to five months even without hunting. That should last them until the first crops came in. They agreed that one of Hafiz's emissaries would meet him at Leaf's Crossing with two plough horses, one bull, seven cows, ten sheep, several dozen chickens and twenty pigs. Richter asked for some goats, but those apparently were only in the northern part of the Kingdom, and could not be obtained on short notice. Hafiz promised to arrange for delivery of several at a future point. Richter smiled thinking about goat stew, yum! He felt that he might have

gone overboard with the animals, but he was a southerner. The idea of actually getting bacon and fried chicken made his mouth water. If there was one thing this world would thank him for it would be evolving dinner meat past mutton. It required another five gold to arrange transport to be waiting in Leaf for these supplies. It seemed steep, but Hafiz assured him it would cost a large amount just to convince a ship captain to let animals ride in his hull. Thinking of the smell, Richter revised his earlier opinion and acquiesced.

Hafiz, or someone he worked with, would also meet him at Leaf's Crossing at the beginning of each month. They would collect the potions, and anything else Richter had to sell. They would also take any requests the fledgling village might have.

Business concluded, the two men clasped hands and parted ways. Richter was happy to see the following prompt:

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in **Trade**. +1% bonus to buying and selling.*

Richter walked to the Hall to see what Mama had found. He tried to use his internal map, but in just the space of a day the tent city had changed. Richter wouldn't have believed it possible, but it seemed the Grand Market was almost a living thing. Sighing, he found another urchin and gave him a few coins. Somehow, the barefooted boy was able to navigate in a way that

not even the Traveler's magic could match. Half an hour or so later, he emerged on the promenade and walked towards the Hall. He found Mama at the back and was early enough that the line hadn't formed yet. When she saw him, she gave a few muttered directions to one of her aides, then stood and led him outside.

He told her of the nonhumans that had agreed to come with him and what their professions were. She nodded and said she had several families of hunters and farmers as well as several individuals in a variety of professions that would happily join him. He was taken outside by one of her associates and spent the next several hours meeting the candidates. He spoke to each about nonhumans, and dismissed from consideration any who showed issues with them. He ultimately chose another fifty-seven humans. When their families were factored in, he had agreed to take in another one hundred and three people to the village. He went back inside and paid Mama her fee, five coppers per person. He was about to leave when she stopped him. "There is one more person I would like you to meet." She grabbed one of her older associates, and stepped to the side with him. The man looked somewhat confused.

"Do you trust me, Randolphus?" she asked.

"Of course, Jala," he said in a cultured voice.

“You have been a wonderful help, and a better friend. I have been happy to help you, but you are being wasted here. This man is about to start a new village, and quite honestly has no idea what he is doing.”

“Hey,” Richter exclaimed.

“Do not interrupt Mama,” she scolded. Turning back to Randolphus, “He is making a new community, but does not know how to handle the countless problems that will come up. I think you should go with him.”

Addressing Richter now, she said, “Randolphus was the chamberlain for the late King. He faithfully managed the affairs of the castle for decades. You are lucky to have him. Now you are both strong-willed and pigheaded, so rather than waste anymore of my time, simply say, ‘Thank you, Mama!’”

Feeling like he was in third grade, Richter chuckled and said, “Thank you, Mama,” and was quickly followed by Randolphus doing the same. With a slight smile on her face she went to sit behind her desk, saying over her shoulder, “No charge.”

Randolphus was a tall, older man with a well-trimmed grey beard. His hair was long and black, hanging around his head to his shoulders. He wore a grey shirt with a black vest and black pants. When they shook hands to have a more formal introduction, his grip was firm, but he did not squeeze overly hard. “I remember you from the other day. Despite her good

intentions, I would not force myself into anyone's service. Do you have any need of my aid?"

"If you are half as impressive as she said, I really will be lucky to have your help. Our village will be the definition of humble compared to a king's palace, but I intend to make it something special. Will you help me?"

"It would be my pleasure, my Lord," Randolphus replied, bowing his head.

"We will be traveling to the Forest of Nadria. What I really need right now is someone to organize all of the workers Mama has arranged. Can you get them all to Leaf's Crossing? I will have a ship to pick them up in a week's time, give or take a few days."

"It will be done, my lord."

Knots of tension that Richter had not even been aware of began to unravel from his back and neck. He smiled and said, "Randy, we are going to get along great." He turned and left with a bit of pep in his step, missing his new chamberlain's long suffering sigh over his new sobriquet.

By the time Richter made it back out of the Grand Market, more than half the day was gone and so Richter decided to check back with Sion. Entering the inn, Terrod ran up to him. "Where have you been? Never mind. We have broken the code, or at least part of it. I know where Isabel is!"

“Where? I am ready to go with you.”

“Do you know who Count Stonuk is?”

“No, I haven’t heard anything about the nobility in the Kingdom.”

“Well he is one of the main proponents of the new laws, and a personal friend of the King. His lands are less than a day’s journey south, but he has an estate inside of the city. A friend of mine works on his estate here, helping in the kitchen. He told me that a Wood Elf fitting Isabel’s description has been seen,” Terrod’s voice caught for a second and he stopped. Then his face firmed, his eyes full of unshed tears but also a savage anger. “She has been seen in his personal chambers. He is having a ball in three days, and then he is leaving the city for the season. I won’t be able to get to her once he’s back in his own lands surrounded by all of his guards.”

“What about on the road? We slip into their group while they are moving, grab Isabel, and slip out when they stop,” Sion asked.

Terrod shook his head, “They live too close. He would most likely leave in the morning and travel straight there without stopping. It is completely open terrain. We won’t have a chance. In the light of day any attack will be seen miles off. And even if we succeeded, we cannot openly attack the nobility to rescue an elf. Word would get back to the King and all the nobility would be up in arms. It would give the King the excuse he needs

to enact even harsher laws against the nonhumans. The only thing stopping him now is that some of the older and more powerful nobles would not go along with it.”

“So what is the plan?” Richter asked.

“My contact can sneak us into the estate the night of the ball. Three of us. Four max. Sion, I am sorry but you cannot come. Any nonhumans would ruin the plan immediately. Once we are inside, we pose as servants. He told me that Isabel is being kept in a room attached to the count’s chambers. Each night they are brought their food by one of the servants. I will pose as the servant and go to her.” Terrod looked at Richter, “What I need is for you to handle the guards in front of the count’s chambers. Ideally, in a way without bloodshed, and without them being able to identify us. No matter what though, they will need to be dealt with or I will not be able to get Isabel out.”

Richter looked back at Terrod, “I said I would help you and I will. I do not have much in the way of stealth skills though. My imbued arrow will kill them, but you know how much noise it makes. It would alert every guard in the house.”

Terrod was nodding quickly, “I know, I know! I have thought of that. No one that we freed can come with us for the same reason that Sion needs to

stay behind. Nonhumans would immediately be detained and questioned. But that doesn't mean they do not want to help. There are two adept mages present, one of Dark and one of Earth. The Dark adept has a spell that could accomplish what we need. I've already checked though. None of the humans that are part of our group have the affinity to learn Dark magic, but I thought you might. You already seem to have multiple magics. Will you try?"

No matter what Terrod had asked, Richter would have complied. The desperation and stress in the man's voice was heartrending, "Of course, Terrod. Where can I find them?"

"Come with me," he said, walking towards the inn's stairwell.

At the end of the hallway on the second floor there was a small open area. A rectangular table was there with six chairs. Sunlight streamed through the window, but a light breeze came through as well making for a very pleasant climate. A dwarf, an elf and a gnome sat around the table. Richter used *Analyze* on each in turn.

Name: **Zarr**. Mountain Dwarf Level 17. Health 420. Mana 350. Stamina 320. Disposition: Friendly. ...

Name: **Ulinde**. High Elf Level 18. Health 310. Mana 320. Stamina 260. Disposition: Friendly. ...

Name: **Quasea**. Arcane Gnome Level 16. Health 150. Mana 730. Stamina 110. Disposition: Friendly. ...

Richter greeted each in turn by their names.

Zarr looked at him sternly, “You should not use yer ability on a person without their consent lad. It’s bad manners.”

Quasea just laughed however. “Oh Zarr, stop teasing the boy. As if you wouldn’t do the same if you could.”

“Hmpff! Not really the point at all is it, Q,” he replied.

The elf stepped forward and extended his hand, “Well met, Richter. Thank you so much for your help in freeing our people. Terrod has told us how pivotal you were in the fight against the Night Blades. They were unkind to our people to say the least. Though none of us were held captive in that hole, the suffering of our people still pained us. When I heard the adepts were going to meet you, I volunteered as well. I am an adept Archer and a journeyman of Light Armor, Zarr is an adept Earth mage, and Quasea is an adept Dark sorceress. We can increase your skills over the next three days. It should greatly increase your chances to retrieve Isabel.”

“I appreciate your offer, but I’m not sure if I could afford your

expertise,” Richter said cautiously. The idea of getting more skills was an amazing temptation, but he couldn’t believe they would just help him out of the kindness of their hearts.

“We do not require payment, but it shows wisdom that you do not jump at the first opportunity for more power,” Quasea answered. The gnome had fair skin and long red hair that was woven into a ponytail draped over her left shoulder. She was about four feet tall and had a round, kind face. She wore a black robe belted with a dark purple rope that stopped just above her knees, tied in front with an intricate knot. She looked him in the eye with purple irises that matched her robe, but her gaze was more playful than challenging.

“I will tell you why we are helping you. We owe you a debt either way for freeing our loved ones. I also personally know Isabel, and I would not leave her in the hands of a pig like the count. More than that, however, by deciding to come with you, we have tied our fate to you. The others may not have picked up on your secret, but I am an adept of the Dark. The Dark is useful for many things, but primarily it is used to conceal. I can feel the Mark you try to hide. That, coupled with what Terrod told us about the ‘defenses’ you had in place for the village, really only lead to one simple conclusion: you are the Master of a Place of Power.” The last was said as a statement.

All three looked at him, and Richter felt trapped by the weight of

their attention. The six of them sat in silence gazing at one another. He did not want his abilities known broadly. He had not forgotten Hisako's warning that his power would make him a target. *Analyze* had shown that all three were friendly to him though. They had also all agreed to join his community. There really didn't seem to be much risk. He held up his left wrist and willed the Mark to appear.

"I am the Master of the Mist Village and the Power it is built on. I promise I meant everything I have said before. Everyone that comes to my village will be treated fairly. I am the Master though," he added forcefully. Now that Quasea had forced his hand, he decided it was best to establish the guidelines for how things would be.

The gnome only nodded. "I quite understand... my Lord Richter." She bowed her head slightly and the other two followed suit. "We did not expect anything else. That brings us to the main reason we are helping you. If we are going to make your village a home, then the more prosperous it is, and by extension you are, the better off we all will be. Though do not expect us to always instruct you for free in the future," she said with a smile and a wink.

Richter responded with a smile of his own, "Then I gladly accept your help. Where do we begin?"

He spent the next three days with the three instructors. The skills the

Archer adept taught him were all stamina dependent, and predictably Zarr's and Quasea's skills were mana-based. The spell that was necessary for the mission came from Quasea, *Troubled Sleep I*, but required a skill level of three in Dark magic. She also taught him two level one spells that he cast relentlessly until his Dark magic level increased to level three. After working with the three trainers, his skills had increased and he had gained several new ones.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 4 in **Light Armor**. +8% to defense of all light armor.*

...

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 6 in **Light Armor**. +12% to defense of all light armor.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: **Grace in Combat**. If wearing all light armor, dodge increased by +1%. This is a subskill of Light Armor.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in **Grace in Combat**. Dodge increased by +2%.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 6 and 7 in **Archery**. +14% bonus to aim. +14% bonus to damage.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: **Double Shot**. You can fire an arrow and then a second arrow with less than a second between them.*

Accuracy of first shot decreased by 25% and accuracy of the second shot decreased by 50%. Cost: 20 stamina. This is a subskill of archery.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 and 3 in **Double Shot**.*

Accuracy of first shot decreased by 23% and accuracy of the second shot decreased by 48%.

*Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: **Drill Shot**. Strong focus lets you find holes in an enemy's armor. You can ignore 10% of an opponent's armor. Takes two seconds to aim. Cost: 25 stamina. This is a subskill of archery.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in **Drill Shot**. You can ignore 11% of an opponent's armor.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Dark Magic**. Darkness is the magic of concealment, secrets and hidden power. Mastery of this Power allows you to steal from the gods and demons alike.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 2 and 3 in **Dark Magic**. New spells are now available.*

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Night Vision. The target of this spell can see with only the faintest light. This is a spell of Dark Magic. Cost: 5 mana. Duration: 3 hours. Range: 10 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Weak Cloying Darkness**.

Cast a cone of thickened darkness 15 feet in length from your hand.

Movement and Attack speed of targets decreased by 20%. All in area of effect will suffer from spell. Will not work in direct sunlight. This is a spell of Dark Magic. Cost: 30 mana. Duration: 10 minutes. Range: 10 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: 5 minutes.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Troubled Sleep**. Places your target in a restless sleep. He will be plagued by nightmares until

awakening. Any attack or hostile action taken against target will awaken them. Area of effect five feet. This is a spell of Dark Magic. Cost: 50 mana. Duration: one hour. Range: 15 feet. Cast time: 3 seconds.

Cooldown: 15 minutes.

*You have reached skill level 2 in **Earth Magic**. New spells are now available.*

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Summon Weak Insects**.

Summons a host of stinging and biting insects in a ten-foot-wide circle.

Causes minimal damage, but impedes concentration. This is a spell of Earth Magic. Cost: 25 mana. Duration: 5 minutes. Range 20 feet. Cast

time: 1 second. Cooldown: 20 minutes

Constant use and depletion of his stamina and mana earned him a +1 to Constitution, Endurance and Wisdom. *Double Shot*, which had seemed almost useless initially, got less of a penalty as he leveled it. He could see the benefit of continuing to invest in the skill if at level 50 he could fire twice as fast as another archer. *Drill Shot* could definitely come in handy as well. Richter had asked Ulinde if *Drill Shot* could negate all armor when the skill level was high enough. Unfortunately, the answer was no. Different skills had different caps they could advance to. Drill shot, for instance, could ignore up to 60% of armor when maxed out at skill level 50. The armor penetration also depended on the type of arrow being used and the type of armor it was being used against. A simple iron arrow would barely harm dragon scale armor for instance, even if Drill shot was maxed. Once again reality was intruding on Richter's plans for world domination.

There was no denying the usefulness of the training and the importance of his instructors. Ulinde explained that training with someone at a higher level than you in a skill would increase the speed with which you learned the skill. The amount of the bonus was based on the level of the trainer compared to your respective level. Richter also asked how Ulinde could teach light armor skills, when he was only a journeyman in that skill.

The archer looked confused for a moment until Richter talked about how he knew only adept and master magicians could teach spells. Ulinde nodded in understanding and said that didn't apply to learning new skills.

An added benefit of the training was that Sion was able to learn from Ulinde as well. The sprite obtained the skills *Grace in Combat*, *Double Shot* and *Drill Shot*, but even more useful, *Stun Shot*. It was a level ten archery subskill, so unfortunately, the subskill remained beyond Richter's grasp.

Training had been tiring, but extremely beneficial and efficient. He definitely progressed faster than he would have alone. Richter continually professed how thankful he was that these three were going to be part of his village. When he expressed that to Quasea, she just gave him a pinch on the butt and a saucy wink before walking off.

The gnome's forward behavior didn't hold Richter's attention long. He was daydreaming of creating a culture of open learning in the Mist Village. From what he could see, knowledge was guarded jealously in The Land. The price of the books was a clear indication. One book cost three months of wages for the average worker. That wouldn't be the case in his village. Every skill that could be learned would be. Dreams of arrow-shooting Dark Earth magicians were dancing through his head. He decided to be honest with himself. Jedis. He really wanted jedis.

The three days came and went surprisingly quickly. The only breaks Richter took from his training was to check on the progress of his new people. Both the humans and nonhumans had been industrious about organizing for passage to their new home. The human settlers, along with Randolphus, had left for Leaf's Crossing the day before. Richter had paid several coins to a messenger to ride ahead and carry a message to Rosy at the Whistling Hen. That more than anything else drove home how much he had taken for granted on Earth. In an age where almost everyone had access to VRmail, or at least archaic email, communication around the world was commonplace. Here in The Land, he had just paid a month's wages to mail a letter.

He didn't waste the opportunity. The note told Rosy that he needed to rent out the entire inn to house the human portion of his people for a day or two. He included in the message what he hoped was a sufficient amount of coins for their room and board, but promised to make up the difference in a few days if he was short.

The nonhumans had slowly ferreted their families to the Laughing Imp or other safe houses that Terrod and his compatriots had access to. It had been an emotional series of days for them as there was a very real possibility that they would not see those left behind for several years, if ever again. Terrod and Richter had decided to implement everything on the same day.

The same day of the count's ball, the holds of the ships they had commissioned were slowly filled throughout the day with the nonhumans. Richter and Sion would join them after saving Isabel. She would also come to the village, as it would be way too dangerous for her to remain in Law after escaping the count. Terrod would stay behind and try to find the other nonhumans that had been sold. So far, no further information had been gleaned from the ledger. He was ultimately planning to sell the inn, and if possible make a new life in Leaf's Crossing. Isabel could join him some time later. Due to his training and organizing, Richter lost track of time. Before he knew it, Terrod had walked into the room at the end of the hallway where Richter was sitting with Zarr and simply said, "It's time."

CHAPTER 25 – Day 48 – Hacor 1, 15,368 ABG



Terrod's contact in the count's household had found servants' uniforms for them to wear. Besides holding women against their will, apparently Count Stonuk was also guilty of horrible taste. His house colors were burnt orange and white. Richter felt like a creamsicle. To make it worse it wasn't just a touch of orange here and there. Instead the servants were required to wear a poncho-like outfit that made them look like the playing cards that served the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland. The only consolation was that Richter was sure everyone would be so distracted by the garish clothes that no one would remember their faces.

Sion was not happy to be left out of the plan, but agreed to hide in a nearby alley. If all went pear shaped, he could cover their retreat. The noise from a well-imbued arrow strike should scare anyone, and might give them precious moments to escape.

The infiltration party was composed only of Richter, Terrod and Jeremy. Apparently the window to enter the count's home was extremely short, and any more people would cause a problem. Richter wore his armor

under the clothes, any buckles wrapped in cloth so as not to make noise and betray their disguise. Getting into the count's house was actually easy. The party meant a large amount of deliveries and movement. The three picked up an order the head of the kitchen had made at a local bakery, and then walked in through the back gate. The guard only checked their baskets of bread against a list of expected deliveries, then barked at them to move along.

Richter was somewhat surprised, but then he realized that it was no different than any large upscale party in his world. This was just the house of a rich guy, not some secret government bunker. After all, who would challenge a noble who had his own private army, and could kill them with zero consequences? Guess just three badass mofos like us, Richter thought with a smile.

They walked in, and delivered the bread to the kitchen. Terrod's contact turned out to be a nondescript man of middling height and brown hair. He barely acknowledged Richter or Jeremy. Terrod had told them about the huge risk the man was taking, and they all agreed not to engage him or try to exchange names. They had timed their entrance to coincide with when the food was brought up to the count's room. It minimized their risk of being discovered as frauds.

Terrod picked up a plate of food, and walked up the stairs. Richter and Jeremy followed discreetly behind. When he got to the room, the guards

merely waved him through, apparently well used to the count's captives being fed at this time. He missed half a step when one guard made an off-color comment about the girl having more than enough to eat when the count returned. Richter thought Terrod might kill the man, but he thankfully stuck with the plan and entered the room.

As soon as he was inside, Richter started counting. The plan was to get to a hundred count and then cast the spell. Jeremy was keeping lookout on the stairs one floor down. The greatest weakness in the plan was that there was no one to watch the far end of the hall. If anyone came from that direction while Richter was casting *Troubled Sleep* upon the guards, or if the spell didn't work, the jig was up.

He counted silently and at ninety-seven began to cast the spell. As Richter was counting, he realized that he had never discussed with Terrod if the count to one hundred was when the man would exit or when Richter was supposed to cast the spell. It would be horrible for them all to be killed for such a stupid mistake. 'Go on three' or 'one, two, three then go' was one of the biggest flaws in guy communication. Even though sleep spells were lethal weapons as they allowed for a coup de grace, the entire plan would fall apart if Terrod exited before the guards were knocked out.

Peeking around the corner to see the two guards, Richter focused his will and cast the spell, the necessary words and hand movements coming

unbidden, but flawlessly executed. The guard closest to him slumped as soon as Richter finished casting the spell. The other reached out a hand to brace himself against the wall, though. He strained to straighten his legs, and his mouth opened to shout, but after a second more, he collapsed next to the other one.

Richter ran forward, knocking twice on the door. Terrod opened the door and grabbed one of the guards under the arms, dragging him into the room. Richter did the same with the other guard. The entire process including the spell took fifteen seconds. Jeremy came in behind him, and they closed the door. The two of them began to strip the guards. A brown-haired, elven beauty with haunted eyes held onto Terrod for a second with frantic strength. He murmured in her ear and then stared into her eyes. She nodded her head and released him, but Richter noticed her hands were still shaking.

The livery of the guards was similar to the uniform of the servants, but of course they were also wearing armor. Luckily it was not plate, or there was no way they would have gotten it off in a reasonable amount of time. Each guard was wearing a chainmail shirt, chainmail coif and a kettle helm. They each had swords and kite shields as well. Richter tried to slow his breathing as he focused on his task. He cast *Weak Haste* on the three of them, hoping to save precious minutes. He grimaced slightly at the loss of the mana, almost half of his total. He took a mana potion. He hated to use it, but

if there was a fight on the way out, he would want his mana higher. His mana bar refilled quickly.

After several minutes, each guard had been stripped and Terrod and Jeremy were wearing their armor and weapons. They would of course not pass a close inspection, but from a distance they looked like any other two guards. It had been decided Richter would not pose as a guard on the way out because his Wood Sprite armor was superior to anything his colleagues had. He had lost the bonus to having the complete set on, unfortunately, having had to remove the helm, gauntlets and shoes as they could not be concealed in his disguise as servant. They tied up the actual guards, shoving gags in their mouths. The spell was supposed to last an hour, but one had shown some resistance, so who knew how long he would actually be out. Richter stood up and took in his surroundings.

The room was opulent to say the least. Paintings and tapestries covered the stone walls. A round table of almost black wood was off to the left side of the room with four upholstered chairs, each with intricate stitching. A canopied bed that could easily fit ten people was against the back wall, the sheets rumpled and hanging off the side of the bed. A large fireplace was resting cold against one wall.

The most fascinating thing in the room was the woman they had come to save. Isabel was about five feet eight inches tall. Her hair was loose

around her shoulders and hung well past her shoulders. Her skin was the dusky brown of the wood elves. It had the appearance of a black base that had been painted over with chestnut in a way he had associated with Indians he knew back home. A tight-fitting gown didn't hide hips that were neither narrow nor wide, a slender waist and small, firm breasts. What arrested him was her eyes though. Her irises were gold like wheat seen on a cloudless day in midsummer. Those same beautiful eyes were bloodshot and sorrow-filled. They convinced him of one thing. He would kill the count if he ever had the opportunity.

Terrod was holding her again and her grip seemed even tighter than before. Richter waited a few seconds, not wanting to disturb the comfort this woman was clearly seeking from her loved one, but he couldn't ignore their precarious position for long. Clearing his throat, he said, "Terrod. Terrod we have to get her dressed and get out of here."

The man made eye contact with Richter, his gaze initially furious that anyone would take him away from comforting his lost love even for a moment, but he came back to himself, and nodded, separating from the woman again. Turning his back to give her privacy, Richter looked out at the wealth in the room. He looked at Jeremy and said, "You move very quietly. Am I correct in assuming that you have a *cough* nontraditional way of earning a living?"

The man stared at him for a moment before chuckling, “You might be safe to assume that. Why?”

Giving a ruthless smile, Richter replied, “Because in the next few minutes we are going to rob this bastard blind.”

They rummaged through a small chest at the foot of the bed, finding a pouch of coins and several daggers. In one nightstand, he found more coins, and a small blue wand about a foot-and-a-half long with a white jewel the size of a robin’s egg at the end held in place by a stylized claw. More basic items were present, and Richter didn’t leave anything behind, sweeping everything into his bag. He cleared the expensive flatware, plates and goblets from the table. For good measure, he opened the closet and shoved all of the clothes and shoes he found there into his Bag of Holding. He thought again that the bag was worth at least twice what he had paid for it. Whatever he shoved in, the bag remained flat on the outside. He took his glass dagger to the edge of the framed paintings, cut them loose, and rolled them up along with the rest of the stolen loot. That was when he saw Jeremy looking intently into the cubby of the other nightstand.

A focused look was on the other man’s face, and he was reaching inside the top drawer. Searching for a moment, he seemed to press something. The side of the night stand popped open revealing a hidden cubby. Richter saw that a metal door, presumably for a safe, had been built

into the night stand.

“Damn! I could open this, but we don’t have the time,” Jeremy angrily shook his head.

“Wait,” Richter told him. “Let me try something.”

Richter placed his hand on the safe and invoked his Dungeon Ring. He gave a delighted smile when he heard a click. He pulled open the safe and saw it was full of jewels, papers and, what was this? It looked like the count’s signet ring. With an evil smile, Richter placed it in his bag thinking the good count would love knowing his ring would help to feed the nonhumans he had been persecuting. Gesturing to the jewels, he looked at Jeremy who smiled and nodded his head. The man swept half the gems up and placed them in his pouch. He left the rest for Richter.

“We are ready,” Terrod called. He was wiping tears from Isabel’s face and telling her to be brave. “We need to go.”

Richter shoved the rest of the jewels and the papers into his bag and stood. The four of them mentally prepared themselves, and then Richter stepped out into the hall. Seeing that it was still empty, he waved his companions forward and they walked back the way they had come. The hardest part was remaining calm, and keeping an unhurried pace. To know how difficult it was, imagine having to pee really badly and also walking

away from a growling dog. It was nerve-racking, and yet they couldn't show it.

Despite the stress of the situation, they made their way along the servant corridors with no issues. The most dangerous part of the scenario was behind them, and they walked to the side gate that they had used to enter the estate. The two guards were still there, but no one else was currently around. Not wanting to take any chances, Richter cast *Troubled Sleep*, and both slumped to the ground. They then just walked out.

They met Sion in the nearby alley and ditched the livery of the count. Pausing only to retrieve his bow and don the rest of his armor, they were quickly away. Jeremy doffed the guard's armor saying it slowed him down too much. Richter shoved it into his bag, waste not want not. They picked up the pace, alternating between a walk and a jog down the dark alleys of the capital. Nearing the harbor, they turned down a wide street that exposed them to the light of a full moon. Three other crescent moons hung in the sky as well. Which was the only reason that they saw the man standing in the middle of the street.

"Impressive! That was a fair bit of crime you did there. Coming from me you should take that as a compliment. All of you. Terrod, innkeeper of the Laughing Imp; Jeremy, former cutthroat of the Lawbreakers; Isabel, the lovely Wood Elf; Sion, the Wood Sprite; and Richter, the unknown man." He

smiled broadly.

Everyone tensed at hearing how well informed the man was. “How do you know us?” Terrod shouted.

“You are absolutely right. I am being rude,” the man replied, sounding genteel and magnanimous. “Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Ronin, and I am the leader of the Night Blades. You may remember that you killed almost all of my new members, and burned my house to the ground a few nights ago. I can admit that it has been a hard few days for me and mine. We lost a few more members to attrition and other thief guilds that smelled blood in the water. It also took a few days to figure out who to thank for the, ahem, warm welcome I was greeted with when I came back to my home. Then I remembered who we had sold those pretty little nonhumans to though. So I checked up on anyone in their lives.” The man gave a short laugh. “We couldn’t be sure which one would be rescued, or exactly who would come, but somehow I had a feeling this little elf maid would stir someone’s heart.” He laughed again, and this time ugliness could clearly be heard in the sound.

“Where are the rest of the people you sold?” screamed Isabel.

“Be calm, Isabel. Be calm,” the friendly note was back in his voice. “Do not be so rude. After all, my friends and I have worked so hard to repay

all of you for the kindness you have shown us.” His voice lowered with each following word, the tone of his communication weighed heavily with anger and scorn. “I NEED, to settle, this DEBT!”

Richter heard a faint scuff on the cobblestones behind them, and realized the purpose of Ronin’s entire speech had been to stall them. It had allowed the other thieves to find and catch up with them. To come up behind them! Throwing his arm back he cast *Grease*, and was rewarded with cursing coming from multiple spots as thieves came into view, their *Stealth* interrupted as they fell.

He turned back and cast *Analyze* on this man who would face down four armed men alone, even if only as a delaying tactic.

Name: **Ronin**. Human Level 22. Health 437. Mana 163. Stamina 319.

Disposition: Hatred. Humans are one of the shortest lived, but most prolific breeders in the Land. Humans have a broader affinity for skills than other races. No special bonuses to race. Humans get four points to distribute per level. Profession: **Rogue**.

What? This man had a Profession! Xuetrix had said that only the powerful had Professions. And this Ronin was level twenty-two. This could not bode well.

Sion drew and fired at Ronin, but the man leaned almost leisurely to the side and disappeared from sight. Terrod pushed Isabel against a wall behind him and drew his sword to protect her. Jeremy activated *Stealth* and vanished as well.

Richter began to cast *Troubled Sleep*, but was struck with a spear of rock. The attack made his ice dagger look like a toothpick. The one attack removed thirty-four health, striking him in the side and knocking him down. Praying he had a second before being struck again he cast *Weak Haste*. His power with Air Magic let him quickly get back to his feet.

When he stood up, he saw the mage off to the right with a black wand pointed at him, purple light gathering at the tip. Sion shot an imbued strike at the mage which stopped a good three feet short, causing ripples in the cylinder of force around him. The wizard changed his target and pointed the wand at Sion. A purple sphere shot out from the end of the wand. Sion had started moving as soon as he saw the wizard aiming his wand. The tennis ball sized purple sphere struck the cobblestones right next to Sion. When it hit the street, it popped and spread a thick purple liquid over the stones, which began to bubble and hiss. A small gobbet landed on Sion's leg. The sprite screamed in pain. He quickly dragged his leg on the street, scraping off the viscous acid.

Richter could see the flash of bodies and blades in front of him,

Jeremy and Ronin disappearing and reappearing quickly, fighting as only stealthed figures could. They must be guessing where the other would be in a fast-paced and close range game of cat and mouse. It was impressive that Jeremy had lasted even a few moments against a level twenty-two Rogue. Who knew what benefits the Profession brought?

The rogues behind him were rolling out of the radius of the *Grease* spell to rejoin the fight. Knowing they would be swarmed if the men got up, Richter reached into his quiver and found the Arrow of Flame. He shot it at one of the thieves in the oil. The thief gave a grunt of pain when he was hit, but it quickly became squeals of agony when the arrow ignited the grease he had conveniently been rolling around in. The fire spread through the rest of the grease and ignited two other thieves. Three others managed to escape the fire though, and were quickly getting to their feet. He shouted to Terrod, “Get her out of here! The longer we wait, the more of them will come. We have to escape.”

Sion had recovered quickly and continued to fire shots at the mage, dodging rocky spikes and acid balls in return. None of the arrows were able to penetrate the barrier. Richter fired an imbued arrow at a thief still trying to get up, and struck him in the chest. It knocked the man back into the flames of the grease fire, his screams joining the others. Luckily the flames formed a makeshift wall across the narrow street, and gave him some respite from the

other two thieves. As soon as he felt the slightest bit safe though, a thrown knife grazed his temple putting blood into his right eye. Richter rolled to the right to evade any more attacks.

Terrod was moving down the street with Isabel. The docks were in sight, but were still several hundred yards away. Richter cast *Summon Weak Insects* on the mage, but the bugs remained on the outside of the cylinder of protection the man had made. He tried using *Drill Shot*, but again his arrow failed to penetrate the barrier. The mage just smirked at him and then turned his full attention back to Sion.

Then Richter heard a gurgle. He turned to the right and saw Jeremy and Ronin phase into view. A knife was sticking out of Jeremy's throat. Jeremy's own blade was in Ronin's side. The two stood face to face. Jeremy's wound was clearly fatal, while Ronin's was most likely damaging, but not life threatening or even debilitating. Sion meanwhile had been caught by a half arc of stalagmites that appeared in front of the mage sticking outward and upward. One of the sprite's legs was impaled on a sharp rocky spike. His Companion screamed and tried to pull himself free, but the rock stuck all the way through his thigh. A purple light was once again accumulating at the end of the mage's wand. Richter barely looked as he drew and fired again.

The mage was completely ignoring him, having assumed that he

wasn't a threat. The thief caster had a sick grin on his face as he savored Sion's impending death. Richter felt a brutal pleasure at seeing the shock on the man's face as the Arrow of Negation penetrated the circle of protection, and pierced the mage's chest. The cylindrical barrier flared once and then faded out of existence.

Richter drew, imbued and released again, the arrow aimed at the man's face. The mage snarled at him while yanking a necklace off and cracking it in his hand. A furious scream of "No!" came from Richter's right. Each of the attackers were enveloped in black smoke and a moment later they were gone. His last glimpse of Ronin was an insane and furious expression on the man's face just before the Rogue disappeared.

It was suddenly quiet on the street except for Sion's grunts of pain as he continued trying to pull himself free. Even the still screaming and burning thieves had disappeared. Richter's already released shot exploded against the wall that the mage had been standing in front of only an instant before. Jeremy's body crumpled to the ground, a scarlet arc of blood coming from the hole that Ronin's blade had left in his neck.

It was over. The Earth mage's escape amulet had taken his entire surviving party away, leaving behind only Richter, Sion, Jeremy and the dead. Richter ran over to Jeremy, attempting to stabilize the old thief. The blood had already stopped spurting though, now only dribbling out in weaker

and weaker pulses. The dying man smiled weakly, blood on his teeth, and then his eyes glazed over and he released his last breath.

Richter looked down at the dead man, overcome with emotions he didn't have time to express. He let go of Jeremy's neck and looked at thick blood covering his hand. A moan made him look to the right. He got up and hobbled over to Sion, the pain in his side making his breath come out in short huffs. Richter gave Sion a healing potion and a healing herb. He also placed the healing ring in his friend's hand.

Richter looked the sprite in the eye and said, "I'll pull on three okay? One," and without further warning yanked him off of the rock that had impaled him. Sion screamed, glared and then spit at Richter in as many seconds, and then promptly lost consciousness. Luckily, the potion worked to slow the blood loss down. Richter checked the wound and was relieved that he didn't see any arterial spray. Sion could not use the ring to fully stop the bleeding, so Richter ripped a strip off of his clothes and bound the wound.

Furious with anger and exhausted from the brief but fierce exchange, Richter picked up the sprite and looked at Jeremy's body. He couldn't just leave it there. He was reaching down to throw it over his shoulder when Terrod came running back. When the innkeeper saw Jeremy's body, he just said, "No." That soft refusal of a horrible truth was filled with sorrow.

Terrod didn't fall apart though. He walked over to his old friend and picked up the body, freeing Richter to carry Sion. They moved as quickly as possible down to the dock. The shouts of the crew of the ships they had hired could clearly be heard. They ran aboard one of the ships as the sailors pushed the boat away from dock. They were finally out of immediate danger, but it had been at a high cost. Richter looked out over the moonlit water and checked his prompts.

*You have completed the Quest: **Fight for those Who Cannot II**. Reward: Increased regard from Terrod. Reward: **8,000 XP**.*

Terrod is once again in pain over the loss of his friend, but at least his love is with him. He knows Isabella would still be in captivity if not for your efforts. You have found a new ally!

*Congratulations! You have gained **+100,000 Relationship Points** with **Terrod!***

*Your relationship with the **Terrod** has improved from **Friendly (+1,000)** to **Ally (+1000)**. “Your enemies have become my enemies. They will fall before us!”*

*Total Relationship Points with the **Terrod**: **+101,264***

TRING!

You have reached level 10! Through hard work you have moved forward

along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice. Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

*You have **6 Unused Characteristic Points** and **50% of Unused Skill Growth** to allocate. Now that you have progressed again, you must allocate your points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.*

Richter dismissed the prompts. As wonderful as it was to level, the gravity of the events that had just occurred made it impossible to be happy. Terrod was still holding Jeremy's bloodstained body.

"Terrod," Richter said. "You know you can't stay in the Kingdom. Ronin survived, and if he knows who you are, there is a good chance that Count Stonuk, and by extension the King, will know as well. You aren't safe here."

The stress gave Terrod's visage a bleak and stark look. He simply nodded without speaking.

"I would be proud and happy to have you join us in the Mist Village. As long as I live you will have a home there."

The man broke, a sob escaping him. The enormity of the past few days, the horrors that the woman he loved had suffered, and the loss of his good friend and his home was enough to faze anyone. He didn't allow his

moment of vulnerability to continue though. He carefully set down his friend's body on the ship deck, and he and Richter clasped wrists, each man leaning on the strength of the other.

“Thank you my friend. I gladly accept your offer. I will return to Yves to help the other nonhumans if we can discover their location, though.”

*You have been offered a Quest: **Fight for those who Cannot III**. You have helped many nonhumans, but some still languish in slavery. Terrod is dedicated to saving them. Will you help these people to breathe free air again? Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?*

“I will stand with you Terrod. If we can help them, we will.”

Terrod the human has become your Companion. Companions will stay with you only as long your goals align.

Terrod looked at him with a surprised expression. “I had heard of Companions but I’ve never known any, let alone thought I would become one.”

“I am happy to have you as one,” Richter replied. The reward for the quest made more sense now. Richter had thought that when Terrod's disposition changed from neutral to friendly, that was the extent of it. The real benefit though was that finishing the quest set the stage to gain another Companion. “Sion and I have been Companions from the beginning, but I’m

still not sure what it means,” Richter said.

“I do not know much, but what I have heard is that Companions are devoted to one another’s cause. As time progresses I have heard that you can sense when the other is in danger, and with enough time and devotion to each other, that you can sense intense emotions. There are stories of the greatest Companions being able to share one another’s strengths and mana, even abilities, but I think that is only fantasy.”

Hmmm, Richter thought, having Companions was potentially a way to greatly increase one’s strength. What if Sion could adopt his Limitless Ability? There was a lot to think about. Terrod begged off after that, moving to comfort Isabel.

Once the boat was far enough from the dock, the sailors unfurled the sails. Both ships were moving with the current and quickly picked up speed. Less than an hour later, the lights of Law could no longer be seen, and they were at last on their way home. The sailors had wrapped Jeremy’s body in a tarp and taken it below deck. It was decided that he would be buried in the village. Richter sat next to Sion, who had awoken and used the healing ring. As the boat rocked gently, they leaned against the mast, staring out at the darkness.

CHAPTER 26 – Day 51 – Hacor 3, 15,368 ABG



They linked with the other three boats in Leaf's Crossing, carrying the human settlers, supplies and livestock. Rosy met them at the docks. Richter thanked her and pressed a few more coins into her hand. There was no difficulty or trouble in either arriving at or leaving the town. Not surprising as their speed on the river had considerably shortened the trip time between Law and Leaf's Crossing. While a scout on a fast horse might have made the same time, the count very likely didn't know who had made off with his property yet. Even if he had, it would take a large force considerably longer to gather and oppose them. The bigger fear would be if an attack ship had pursued them, but Terrod said there were not many of them. The royal fleet was comprised mostly of transport ships to move soldiers quickly among the numerous waterways. Luckily, they continued on after Leaf's Crossing unmolested.

Richter decided to invest four of his new characteristic points into Intelligence, and another two into Wisdom. He had decided that he needed a greater capacity for mana usage. The 50% skill boost he got from achieving

levels nine and ten, he invested into Archery. It was his most advanced skill, and seemed like the best way to get a lot of bang for his buck.

A day after leaving Leaf's Crossing, they entered the forest, and five days after that, they reached the mist. Richter had spoken with all the ships captains and warned them of the mist's confusing properties. He had split his Companions, Randolphus and one other man Terrod vouched for among the five ships, giving each immunity from the swirling grey vapors in the air around them. Though they had to move slowly, they were able to navigate the river with each helmsman listening to the five.

A monotone voice greeted him as the village came into view, "Welcome back, my Lord."

Chuckling lightly, Richter replied, "Hello, Futen. I missed your pretty face."

The orb just pulsed slowly without replying.

The mist workers had apparently been busy. The trench was now a good twenty feet deep and thirty feet wide. Trees had been cleared from the areas surrounding the village leaving a potential killing ground if ever they were attacked. Large stacks of white stone were piled up alongside large mounds of iron ore. Several pyramidal piles of logs had been made from dozens of trees each as well. The loose rocks and debris within the ruined

walls had all been removed. The village had been turned into an RTS gamer's wet dream.

That actually wasn't quite right, he reflected. Richter had vast plans for his new home. What he was looking at was closer to the foundation for a grand strategy game. The kind of wonderfully beautiful morass that could devour your personal life for days or weeks at a time. Either way, it was a blank slate with plenty of resources. Richter shook his head. It had not been easy, and had involved travel, pain, blood and loss, but he was finally ready to start making his new world. To begin the Founding of his own Kingdom.

A small ceremony was held for Jeremy. His body was burned on a pyre. All of the nonhumans gathered to show respect to the man who had died for their freedom. That night several deer were roasted, and a small feast was held. Terrod told humorous stories about his old friend to the laughter of many. He later told Richter that Jeremy would have appreciated being remembered like this.

It took a couple days to unload everything from the ships. Once everything was removed, Richter, Sion, Terrod, Randolphus and Terrod's man guided the ships back out of the mist. Richter arranged for one ship to come back to this point in about a month's time. He needed a quick way to get back to Leaf's Crossing to bring his trade goods. Hopefully he would have his own boat soon, but until then the cost of paying for transport was

worth shortening the weeks-long trip to only a few days. It was also considerably less dangerous on the waterways than hiking through the forest.

They made the ten-mile hike back to the village on foot. Richter had been somewhat concerned that Randy wouldn't be able to keep up, but he kept pace with no difficulty. The weather was thankfully not too cold as spring had started. The higher altitude did make a colder temperature than in Law, and the nearby mountains didn't help, but it was only slightly uncomfortable, not dangerous. The primary task everyone focused on was making shelters. The readily available resources made the task go quickly though. While it was being constructed, all two hundred and ninety souls stayed underground. It was not exactly comfortable with that many people, but it was safe and dry.

Randolphus, or Randy, as Richter insisted on calling him to his clear frustration, showed his value immediately. He organized having a latrine dug, hunting parties, creating guard rotations and assigning countless necessary tasks that Richter would not have thought about. The hunters were also given immunity from the mists, but only after each had been spoken to and vetted by Richter again personally. While it would be difficult for a traitor to lead someone back to the village, he didn't want to take any unnecessary risks. Granting everyone immunity now was premature. He did roll the mists back two full miles from the center of the village though to make it easier to move

around. The farmers were also eager to cultivate the lush soil outside of the city wall. They began preparing the land for planting, with guards along the periphery to protect against animal or, god forbid, monster attacks.

The dwarves were massively excited about having access to relatively untouched land and several disappeared on the first day into the hills surrounding the village, exploring tunnels and caves. As far as Richter was concerned, the forge was the next priority construction after shelter. According to the dwarves, a tavern was a close third. Apparently a few dozen casks of ale had been packed on the ships as “essential” supplies.

The first building was finished in little over a week. It resembled a meeting hall more than a house. It was two hundred feet long and seventy feet wide. Richter found the process fascinating. Each log had been denuded by stripping the bark. The bark hadn't gone to waste though as it was rendered down to make a rudimentary tar. The builders had strewn gravel along the ground from the quarry stones to protect from the damp. Overtop the gravel, they had placed logs sawn in half longitudinally to make a crude floor a few inches above the ground. The walls had been erected in only a few days, but the roof took twice as long. It would have taken even longer, but the high strength and nearly endless stamina of the mist workers had saved considerable time. Two rudimentary fireplaces had been built at either end. The large room that resulted was dry and more importantly warm at

night. Everyone's mood improved drastically once everyone had more space to spread out in. Richter knew that for a fact.

You have constructed your first building! Shelter is one of the basic necessities of survival. Your people require more than just the bare essentials, however. Though they have not complained, tensions were getting tight, and morale would have suffered if they had had to endure cramped conditions for much longer. Further information regarding morale can be found on village interface.

Morale increased by +50. Total Morale: +50

I have got to spend some time looking at that interface, Richter thought. He resolved to do it soon.

Once the shelter was finished, the frantic pace slowed down a bit. Initially everyone had worked almost feverishly from sunup to sundown to make the village livable. Sion had even taken charge of the kids to see which had an affinity for Herb Lore, which surprisingly many did. The smell of drying herbs and ingredients became commonplace in the longhouse that they all shared as a living space. A welcome surprise was that the meadow above the village held many valuable herbs, according to Sion.

Richter had initially been concerned that there might be a problem with the humans and nonhumans working together, but his worries came to nothing. Everyone seemed happy to apply themselves to honest work, unhindered by unjust laws. His new people walked around with smiles on

their faces.

There were many things to be done. Quests to be completed. Enemies to be stopped. People to be rescued. Items to be identified and weapons to be forged. He also had an appointment to keep in Leaf's Crossing in about five weeks as arranged with Hafiz. That meant they needed to collect the Potions of Clarity. Richter couldn't wait for more adventure. He would be lying though, if he said he wasn't a bit tired. It was, he decided, time for a short vacation before everything got crazy again. When he discussed it with Sion, his friend wholeheartedly agreed.

The next morning, they left for the Hearth Tree. Richter felt secure leaving the village in Randolphus's capable hands. The villagers already came to the man for instructions on a daily basis. Richter knew that he owed Mama a big hug and a fruit basket.

The Companions had a practical reason to go to the Hearth Tree in addition to just wanting a break. Both of their armors had taken a beating in the past several weeks, and the smiths in the village said they could not fully repair them as they had been made with sprite magic. Sion assured him that Hisako would be able to restore their armaments to full strength, though she might give them an earful about being more careful as well. It seemed like a fair trade to Richter. Both of them were missing the tough, diminutive woman. Richter left Terrod in charge with Randolphus as his capable aid.

Richter stressed that he wanted construction started on a ship as soon as possible.

They decided to take a relaxed pace, speaking little, nearly retracing their initial journey. It seemed so long ago. Encountering nothing more dangerous than a deer, they simply enjoyed the peace of the forest. It was a balm to both of them. It felt like coming home. After several days, they were greeted with the sight of the Hearth Tree surrounded by the sea of golden grass. As always, Hisako seemed to know they were approaching and was waiting at the boundary of the golden sea.

“Be welcome at the Hearth Tree, Richter of the Mist Village,” she said with a warm smile. “And welcome home, my son, I see you have grown in strength. Hopefully in wisdom as well?” The last said with a wry arch of her eyebrow.

“Thank you, mother. Yes, I have learned much, and found a good friend and ally,” Sion replied with a smile.

Richter walked forward and took her hand, “Hearth Mother, thank you. Sion is more than a friend to me. He is a brother. There is no way I could have accomplished what I have accomplished without him. I formally extend the friendship and welcome of the Mist Village to you and your people. I sincerely hope that you will ask me for any help that you might

need.”

A serious look came over her face, “I was hoping that you would say that. There have been small camps of goblins and bugbears seen in the forest between here and the Fire Tip Mountains to the east. They are slaughtering all of the local wildlife and despoiling the Forest. We need to clear them out and learn why they are making inroads into the forest. I will not stand by and watch the Forest of Nadria become like the Whisper Woods, overrun with evil creatures. The Forest *will* be protected, no matter how many battles it takes. Will you help?”

*You have been offered a Quest: **Protect the Forest I.** Bugbears and goblins have invaded the forest and are disrupting nature’s balance. The Hearth Mother is asking for your help. You must destroy an enemy camp. Optional: Find out why the invaders are coming into the forest. Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?*

“Ready to take out some more bad guys?” Richter asked Sion, smiling.

Sion looked back with that bloodthirsty grin of his, “Oh yes, brother! This is what we do!”

~ The Story Continues... ~

Thank you all for reading! I really hope that this story and my characters find a resonance within you. I LOVE making this world, and it means so much that you have joined me in it! The story continues! Peace, love, and the perfect margarita!

Aleron

There is a secret FREE Comic for The Land! Shhh, don't tell anyone!

If you want the comic and want to stay up to date with The Land, please just click [HERE!](#) It's FREE!!!

How to contact Aleron!

Hello you Kings of Fantasy and Queens of Sci-Fi!

I have been reading sci-fi and fantasy for basically thirty years. In the past year I am honored and blessed to have earned the title "The Father of American LitRPG"

My primary goal was, and still remains, to write a story that I would like to read.

Peace, Love and the Perfect Margarita!

I love to hear from my fans. Please don't hesitate to reach out!

1) Facebook Author Page: <https://www.facebook.com/LitRPGbooks/>

2) Website: <https://www.LitRPG.com>

It has:

THE LIST of ALL the LitRPG out there

Monthly Contests with cash prizes, awesome t-shirts and signed books

My Blog and just all around awesomeness!

3) Patreon: www.patreon.com/AleronKong

If you'd like to help me *cough cough* financially in my writing career lol, please join my patreon page. My Core Guild Members get early chapters of my upcoming books, and early audio clips of prerelease audiobooks! You will also get an honorable mention at the end of my latest book!

4) Street Team: tinyurl.com/LitRPGStreetTeam

Perhaps most exciting! I've started a street team! If you're going to a Con, Book Fair, etc sometime soon, join the street team and let me know. I'll send you a free tshirt and some cards to hand out! Send me a pic of you wearing it and I'll put you on the site! Thanks!

5) Newsletter: eepurl.com/cns1UH

I do a weekly newsletter with updates, uplifting stories and funny vids. You can sign up here. If you sign up, you get a free copy of The Land Comic lol!

6) YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/c/LitRPG>

My friends and I make funny/stupid videos! I also do video testimonials with occasional spoilers! FREE on Youtube (yes I know youtube is always free but hey... its FREE lol)

7) Forum: tinyurl.com/AleronForum

If you want to rave about The Land, or maybe just wail and gnash your teeth lol, join many other member of the Mist Village Mafia in my forum!

8) LitRPG Facebook Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LitRPGGroup/>

And if you just LUUUUUVVVVV LitRPG like I do, join THOUSANDS of other people in The Facebook Group!

To find the index with Richter's Status Pages, Village Info, Cool Artwork and just general awesomeness, just click this [LINK](#)!



My pandas wanted to tell you something too.

“PUH-weeese leave a review, or Aleron will cut our heads off like Uncle Marty!!!”

Just push [HERE](#) to save us!

Thank you for once again joining me in The Land! The saga is far from done, but there is another great story I wanted to tell you about! This is kind of a big moment for me because I'm doing a cross promotion with one of my FAVORITE authors. He has come out with a wonderful new story, but honestly, take the time to just enjoy his work in general! I promise that you will not regret it ?? Just click [HERE](#) or on the cover. You guys rock! lol



Thank you for once again joining me in The Land! I promise, as long as you keep reading, I'll keep writing! I do want to tell you about an amazing debut novel, however, Shemer Kuznit's "Life Reset." Personally, I really enjoyed. He departs from many other LitRPGs by having a nonhuman character and focusing on a RTS style world. If you love games like old school Warcraft and Command and Conquer, you are in for a real treat! I hope you enjoy just half as much as I did! ?? Just click [HERE](#) or on the cover. You guys rock! lol

