

THE LAND: PREDATORS

CHAOS SEEDS: BOOK VII

A LITRPG SAGA



ALERON KONG

The Land: Predators

By

Dr. Aleron Kong

The Land: Predators (A LitRPG Saga)

A self-published book by Aleron Kong

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family who have helped make me who I am, but who have passed on to the next phase of their journey. My grandfather Emorrie, my obachan Hisako, my uncle Yoshi. I love you all. You are not forgotten.

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CHAPTER 1 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



The stone around the cave mouth began to shudder. Pieces fell off, and Richter feared he had triggered another earthquake. The tremors eased though and the stone of the cave began to flow. It reshaped itself in less than a minute until the opening was a perfect replica of an adder's open mouth, down to the scales carved into the rock and large fangs hanging down from above. The Dungeon's eyes glowed a very particular shade of red.

Another prompt appeared in Richter's vision. After reading it, he forgot about everything else. The loot from the goblin encampment, his skill prompts waiting to be read, and learning about his hundreds of potential new villagers were all things that could wait. Even the Chaos points he had earned that were begging to be spent seemed less important in that moment. Nothing else mattered except what he had read.

Congratulations, Dungeon Master! The **Dungeon of Bloody Chaos is born!**

The notification had a border the same bloody color as the light shining from the cave's eyes. No sooner had he read the prompt than an itching began on the inside of his right forearm. Richter ripped off his gauntlet and quickly loosened his bracer. By the time he got it off, the itching had faded. In its place was a tattoo of a hissing gray snake with ruby-red eyes. As he looked at it, the image faded. From what had happened in the past, he knew instinctually that he could summon the tattoo back whenever he wished.

THOOMMM!

You have received a Mark: **Blood and Chaos**

Know This, Dungeon Master! You have provided both an Item of Power and a Harbinger and so have created a new Dungeon in The Land. Blood and Chaotic creatures may now recognize you as one of their own. What this bodes for the future, only time will reveal. Your status as Dungeon Master may also affect your interactions with denizens of the Labyrinth. The power of your Mark of Blood and Chaos will grow with your Dungeon level. Current Bonus: **+1% Constitution. +1% Incidence of Finding Treasure. +1% Yield of Treasure**

Richter's eyes widened. Was this a *scalable* Mark? The yield wasn't much right now, but if he could grow the Dungeon to level ten? Level fifty? This could be amazing! He accessed his status page to see his other Marks.

MARK	EFFECT
Master of the Mist Village	You are now the Master of the Mist Village. You may now unlock the Powers of your Domain.
Blood Oath of Vengeance	You have sworn a Blood Oath. You have sworn to avenge the attack on your village and to kill the ones responsible. You were given one year to fulfill this Oath. Failure to do so will cause a drop of 1 Charisma per week until fulfilled. You have 406 days remaining.
Forge of Heavens	Your attacks will have +10% Damage to Spell Barriers . This bonus will increase as the level of your Forge increases.
Dragonkin	You are now considered dragonkin. This may drastically change how some races respond to you, for good or ill. The reaction may be instinctual, as few will be able to detect the change simply based on your physical form. The full ramifications of

	<p>this may never be known, but the following changes have taken place immediately: +5 Strength. +5 Constitution. +5% Fire resistance. +5% Fire magic.</p>
Adventurer	You may now enter the Labyrinth
Blood and Chaos	<p>Blood and Chaotic creatures may now recognize you as one of their own. What this bodes for the future, only time will reveal. Your status as Dungeon Master may also affect your interactions with denizens of the Labyrinth. The boon of your Mark of Blood and Chaos will grow with your Dungeon level. Current Bonus: +1% Constitution. +1% Incidence of Finding Treasure. +1% Yield of Treasure</p>

Richter grinned, retying his bracer back into place. Even though he had just gotten the Dungeon, he was already itching to level it up. The fact that he had no idea how to actually do that was only a minor concern in his opinion. The bonus to Constitution was small now but could potentially be huge if it grew with the Dungeon. The increased treasure was also nothing to

sneeze at. Despite everything that had happened since coming to The Land, he still had a gamer's love of awesome loot.

The next prompts possessed the same red border as the first one.

Know This, Dungeon Master! At the present time, 3 primary capabilities have been unlocked:

One, you control access to this Dungeon. Any and all may enter the **Entrance Chamber**, but proceeding into the Dungeon proper from this entrance is at your discretion.

Two, if called upon by the Dungeon, you and your strike squad can choose to enter the Dungeon as Defenders. As a Defender, you will be immune to all direct attacks by the Dungeon or its creatures, but you will not be able to retrieve any treasure, resources or experience from the Dungeon or its creatures.

Three, you may lead a team of Adventurer's into your Dungeon no matter how many other teams are within the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos. At Level 1, your Dungeon can only accommodate 1 team of Adventurers at a time.

His brow wrinkled. Why the hell would he want to *defend* the Dungeon? Richter was pretty sure he was just going to try and avoid being eaten by whatever the hell was down there. It seemed like he was being

continually encouraged to make the damn thing stronger. He still didn't know why Hisako had convinced him to give up his beloved pet adder. She had been absolutely sure though that he should offer up the strongest monster he could to be the Dungeon's Harbinger. He had assumed it was another way of saying "dungeon boss."

In Richter's opinion, a Dungeon full of guinea pigs sounded a lot better than fighting "the unseen killer," as the shale adder was often called. The damn thing was twenty feet long and could blend in perfectly with its surroundings. Most of its prey never even saw it before they died. If that wasn't creepy and terrifying enough, his former pet had somehow been imbued with Chaotic magic. It meant that magic coursed through its very being. And not just any magic! It wasn't imbued with one of the Basic Elements, or even a Deeper Magic like Blood or Thought. Chaotic magic was a Higher Energy. Richter hadn't even encountered another creature that was imbued with a Higher Energy except, well, himself.

He had gone along with her recommendation though, because she hadn't led him wrong yet. He looked over at his short red-haired ally. The Hearth Mother was still examining the newly-changed Dungeon mouth, so he turned his attention back to the other prompts awaiting his attention.

Know This! As Master of a Dungeon, you are now tied to it. Having built it upon your Place of Power has benefits. You have learned a new spell.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Dungeon Transport**. You may now instantly transport yourself and any creatures within five yards to any accessed transport sphere in the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos. Must be cast within the domain of the village. This is a spell of your settlement. Cost: 100 mana. Duration: Instant. Range: Self. Cast Time: 8 seconds. Cooldown: N/A.

Did he just get a *Summon Home* spell? The Dungeon was already showing its worth. It had always been a fear of his that if his village were attacked again, he would be too far away to help. Now as long as he was within the ten-mile radius of his domain, he could get back instantly. It wasn't perfect. If he were brought back to the Dungeon, that meant he would be returning *outside* of his village walls, but still, it brought a great ease to his heart. He wasn't sure what a "transport sphere" was, but he had no doubt he'd figure it out. More notifications were waiting on him.

*Know This! You have claimed a Dungeon built upon a Place of Power. This will have consequences, both immediate and far-reaching. Embrace your role as **Dungeon Master** to harness this power and avoid pitfalls. As 2 **Powers** have currently been unlocked, your Dungeon will generate +200% more Dungeon Points each day.*

Know This! The choices of Harbinger and Item of Power directly affect the growth of your Dungeon. Foolish are those who fear pain and so avoid the path to power. The classes of your choices have determined the Dungeon Points generated each day.

A color-coded list popped up in his vision:

Common = 1	Uncommon = 2	Unusual = 3	Scarce = 5	Rare = 7
Epic = 10	Mythic = 13	Legendary = 16	Relic = 20	Artifact = 25

The class of your Item of Power is **Artifact**. Your selection of the **Chaotic Bloodstone** as your Dungeon's Item of Power will generate 25 Dungeon Points per day.

Your Item of Power is **Unique** in The Land. +3 Dungeon Points for using such an item.

Your Item of Power uses **Chaos Magic**. +5 Dungeon Points for choosing an Item that can utilize a Higher Energy.

Richter stopped for a moment. *Artifact?* The Chaotic Bloodstone was an *artifact*? The vein in his forehead began to throb. When he had

initially examined it, its class had been *relic*. That was impressive enough, but now it was *artifact*! He didn't even know if there was a higher class of item in The Land. The list he was looking at stopped at "Artifact," but that might just be because it listed up to what his Item of Power was. He ground his teeth. He had had an *artifact* in his hands and a fucking hole in the ground had eaten it!

Shaking his head in irritation, he went back to his prompts.

Your Harbinger is an **Epic** creature. Your selection of the **Chaotic Reptile** as your Harbinger will generate 10 Dungeon Points per day.

Your Harbinger is **Unique** in The Land. +3 Dungeon Points for having such a creature.

Your Harbinger uses **Chaos Magic**. +5 Dungeon Points for choosing a creature that can utilize a Higher Energy.

The Dungeon of Bloody Chaos generates **153 DPs** per day.

Know This! The two Powers you have awakened, **Life** and **Air**, can be made manifest by your Dungeon in many ways. Danger and Reward are close bedfellows. Guard well your life.

Know This! As Dungeon Master, your abilities affect the Dungeon. Your Harbinger is a Reptile Beast; as such, your Dungeon would normally be populated by Reptile Beasts. Your **Limitless** ability has extended this monster type to include all Beasts and Animals. More options may be possible in the future. Examine your Dungeon screen for more information.

Dungeon screen, Richter thought to himself. Letting his eyes unfocus, he realized there was a new icon in the corner of his vision. Wasting no time, Richter selected it. The image was a miniature version of the cave mouth, a stylized snake's head with glowing red eyes.

Dungeon Name	Dungeon of Bloody Chaos
Monster Type	Beasts (<i>All</i>) and Animals (<i>All</i>)
Rooms	Entrance Chamber
Level	1
Dungeon Points	153/day Current Reserved Total: 0
Available Resources	None

Available Loot

None

To say that the screen was bare bones was an understatement.

Luckily, his next prompt held some hope.

*To expand the information available, assign a **Dungeon Keeper**.*

*Congratulations! You have discovered a new Job for your village: **Dungeon Keeper**.*

Richter tried to assign the Job to himself, but the answer was a resounding “Nyet!”

*You do not possess the qualifications to become a **Dungeon Keeper**. Choose someone worthy.*

Kind of a dickish way to say no, Richter thought to himself. He just shook his head though and dismissed the prompt. It had been worth a try. He accessed the next prompt with a red border.

Know This! The capabilities of your Dungeon are legion, but it can only manifest that which has been discovered, offered or taken. Place items and resources in the Well of Offering to increase the possible rewards of your Dungeon. The Dungeon can absorb loot and resources at any point, but only items placed in the Well of Offering have a 100% chance of being

learned by your Dungeon.

Richter looked around, but the only thing outside of the Dungeon was the black spike with the golden ball on top. This “Well of Offering” had to be inside. He was about to tell Hisako that it was time to venture in, but then he caught the look on her face. She was positively apprehensive. The sprite was staring at the entrance to the cave. Richter examined the yawning snake mouth that was the portal to the Dungeon. When he had first seen it, the tunnel entrance had looked like a dark opening in the earth. Now, it was almost like a gigantic monster was going to swallow them all. He could well understand why she might be feeling some hesitation.

Still, there was no other choice. He would have to venture into the snake’s mouth sooner or later, so it might as well be sooner. Richter wouldn’t allow anyone else to risk their lives doing something he wasn’t willing to do himself. He walked up to the Hearth Mother.

“I’m going inside, Hisako. You may come with me if you like. I hope you do, but I understand if you want to stay outside.”

She looked down the hill they were standing on. Only minutes had passed since they had sent everyone else away. The village guards and sprite warriors were still helping the newly released prisoners through the village

walls. Their already slow pace was worsened by the large trench that surrounded the entire village. There were only three passages across the moat, and it was taking time to usher hundreds of people across.

Hisako looked back at him and said, “I want to accompany you. I wanted to suggest that we enter myself, but for some reason I just feel hesitant. It took me a moment to realize what was happening, but I believe I am being enchanted. Hold one moment.” She started casting a spell and golden light surrounded her hand. After speaking several words of Power, the light flared and then went out. Her back straightened immediately. The hesitant tone left her voice, and she exclaimed, “Much better. This Dungeon is casting a *Doubt* effect on any who would approach it.”

Richter frowned. He didn’t feel any fear or doubt. The Dungeon looked a bit intimidating but in the same way dating an NBA player’s ex-girlfriend was intimidating. He was still going in there. He was about to ask her to explain, but he decided to check his combat log first.

*Richter has resisted **Doubt**. As Dungeon Master, you have full immunity to the external defenses of the Dungeon.*

He hadn’t even known! Already he had discovered a third perk of being a Dungeon Master. “I seem to be immune to it,” Richter said.

Hisako gazed at the Dungeon mouth consideringly, “This newest

addition to your village is already proving itself deadly. Dungeons desire to consume those who enter within them. A *Fear* effect would drive away its prey, but *Doubt* is far more insidious. Adventurers would still enter, but the enchantment placed on the entrance would most likely nestle in their hearts. At a critical moment, it might make them hesitate. In battle, a moment of doubt can cause the eternity of death.”

Richter grew worried. “Does this mean anyone that enters will have to deal with this effect?” He had little idea exactly what the implications of being the Master of a Dungeon were, but if Hisako’s initial excitement had been any indication, it was a very good thing. Still, it was also clear that the Dungeon was dangerous. Power was great and all, but he wasn’t willing to sacrifice his village to get it. He had already been hesitant to let anyone in, but if the entrance gave everyone the *Doubt* debuff then he might need to make it off limits completely.

Hisako shrugged, “I have made myself immune to the effect, but it is still there. You may be able to do something about it through your position as Dungeon Master. We may also learn more by exploring.” She squared her shoulders and said firmly, “Let us find out.” With that, she marched into the snake’s mouth. Richter blinked once at the strong-willed woman and then hurried to catch up.

CHAPTER 2 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



Richter half-expected the lifelike cave mouth to snap shut on them both, but despite the forbidding carving of a snake's mouth, it remained open. Once inside, the tunnel quickly angled downward at a twenty-degree angle. It strengthened the feeling that the two Masters were sliding down the gullet of a monster. The shaft also curved to the right as if following the coils of a serpent. After two full revolutions, the daylight was lost.

Hisako muttered a spell that made white light shoot from her hand like a spotlight. As they moved, Richter summoned mist lights and threw them to the sides of the tunnel. They would illuminate the passage for a full year before burning out. Richter kept his elementum short sword firmly in his grasp as they descended further into the depths.

The tunnel itself was nothing special, only brown and grey rock. Loose pebbles were scattered across the stone floor, and soon there was a feeling of dampness in the air as they crossed under the water table. He

could feel moisture on the stones.

After walking for only three minutes, the shaft ended in a cavern. Hisako cast another spell and white sparks shot from her hand in all directions. Wherever the sparks landed, the surface of what they touched began to glow. Five-inch circles of phosphorescent white light appeared all around the room. Even Richter's armor began to luminesce. Seeing as how it was still covered in blood and gore from the battle with the goblins, it was not the most pleasant sight. Hisako's spell had achieved its goal, however. They could now see the entire space.

The grotto they stood in wasn't huge. It was about the size of two basketball courts laid side by side. The ceiling couldn't have been more than thirty feet high. One strange thing was that no stalactites or stalagmites marred the smooth surfaces of the chamber. The only features that stood out were the entrance they had come out of, another exit across the chamber from them, and what looked like a well in the center of the room. The far exit had a barely perceptible, shimmering curtain of energy across it.

The well was formed of tightly fitting blocks of what looked like marbled quartz. The brilliant white stone contrasted strongly with the brown rock of the rest of the chamber. The well itself rose four feet from the ground and was four feet across. What both gave Richter pause and made Hisako's eyes narrow in anger were the veins that traced through the marbled quartz.

Such striations were normally a grey hue, but these were a dark red stone the color of blood. The veins also throbbed with light as if in time with a distant heartbeat... which didn't help.

Another prompt with a red border appeared in Richter's vision.

Congratulations! You have found a Room: **Entrance Chamber**. This Room is the first chamber of every Dungeon. No monsters or other dangers of the Dungeon can harm you in this location. A free Well of Offering is supplied in every Entrance Chamber. None can pass further into the Dungeon from this location without your permission, Dungeon Master.

Richter walked up and looked inside the well, wondering what wonders would reveal themselves. He was disappointed. The chaos seed didn't know what he had been expecting. Maybe a giant hand to reach out and grab him when he peeked over the side. Possibly a cauldron of blood bubbling far below. Maybe even a sea of snakes climbing over each other, Indiana Jones-style. You had to love the classics. All he saw though was dirt. The entire thing was filled with dry dust only one foot down from the lip of the well.

Wrinkling his brow in disappointment, Richter placed a hand on the

well. A prompt sprang into his vision.

Greetings, Dungeon Master. You have found the **Well of Offering**. Items and resources sacrificed down this well may be used by your Dungeon if the appropriate conditions are met. Have a care! Nothing sacrificed to the Well of Offering can be retrieved. Do you wish to activate the Well? Yes or No?

Richter chose “Yes” and his eyes grew as big as dinner plates. The floor of the well dropped away like it had gone to warp. He jumped back with a startled oath. All that was left was a stark nothingness. He felt like he was staring into a black hole. Not just a dark well, but instead an actual collapsed star. It was insanely disconcerting. Hisako looked at him quizzically.

“What is wrong?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” he shot back incredulously. “You don’t see that?”

She looked over the side of the well, “All I see is dirt.”

Shaking his head, Richter walked back over to the well. When he looked in again, he still saw the bottomless pit. It made him experience a slightly nauseating vertigo. Since nothing else happened though, his

curiosity took over. “Tell me what you see happen now.”

Richter reached into his bag and summoned a copper coin into his hand. Keeping one eye on Hisako, he dropped it. The coin fell faster than it should have. It looked like the void actively sucked it up. This time, it was Hisako that exclaimed in surprise.

“It disappeared! What did you do?”

“I offered the coin to the Dungeon,” Richter responded simply.

“What exactly did you see?”

“As soon as you let go, it simply vanished.”

Richter read the new prompt that had appeared in his view.

*Item Accepted. Dungeon Loot now includes: **Copper Coins**.*

Know This! The incidence of items appearing in the Dungeon is proportional to the items’ rarity, complexity, and natural abundance in the surrounding region, as well as discovered Rooms and many other factors. You may affect the likelihood of certain drops in the Dungeon’s Loot Allocation.

Richter’s eyes widened in surprise and excitement. He accessed the snake icon in his view again and selected “Settings.”

*You lack the appropriate expertise to access the Dungeon's **Loot Allocation** information. A Dungeon Keeper is required for this.*

“Son of a bitch,” Richer muttered under his breath.

“What was that?” Hisako asked.

He just shook his head. With a sour look on his face, he reached into his bag for other items.

*Items accepted. Dungeon Loot now includes: **Silver** and **Gold Coins**.*

He decided to start being a little more generous and dropped in a small, semi-precious gem. The prompt changed slightly.

Know This! Certain items can be used both **Loot and **Resource**.**

*Items accepted. Dungeon Loot and Resources now include: **Jasper**.*

The obvious question was, ‘What’s the difference between “loot” and “resources.”’ Luckily, he was with a relative expert on Dungeon Lore. He related the last prompt, word-for-word. Hisako’s answer was fairly simple.

“Dungeons are not only breeding grounds for monsters. They also grow ‘resources.’ When you offered the gem, it was apparently accepted as an ‘item,’ which means it can be found in treasure chests or gained as loot from slain creatures. The fact that it is also a ‘resource,’ means that miners

you bring into your Dungeon may be able to find jasper in the walls as well.”

Well that’s awesome news, Richter thought. It made the Dungeon even more valuable. It also meant he would need to guard any noncombatants he brought in. He would figure out the logistics of that later, but he was already envisioning having a small fort built inside the Dungeon.

He reached into his bag again. The “frugal” part of him hated throwing the jewels away. The pragmatic side of him had always been stronger though... albeit only just. It understood that investing in the future was necessary.

*Items accepted. Dungeon Loot and Resources now include: **Tiger’s Eye, Amethyst, and Topaz.***

Richter was dropping in the smallest gem he could find each time, but it still felt like he was saying goodbye to precious friends. He had no idea if dropping in larger stones might mean that he could in turn *find* larger stones in the Dungeon, but the prompts didn’t give any indication of that so he just couldn’t bring himself to drop in bigger jewels. Even the small rubies, emeralds and diamonds he had just literally tossed down a hole were worth hundreds, if not thousands, of gold. He also did not have an endless supply. The small chest of gems he had found upon claiming the village was more

than half gone. Richter knew that he would have to start earning more coin soon. Until he fully understood how this actually worked, he wouldn't risk any more money than was absolutely necessary on this magic hole. Richter remembered his uncle once saying something very similar about marriage.

He dropped in another item.

*Item Accepted. Dungeon Loot now includes: **Common Soul Stone**.*

*Resource Not Accepted. As the Dungeon lacks the appropriate Room, **Common Soul Stone** (empty) cannot be used as a Resource.*

Yet another prompt he didn't fully understand. Focusing on the good, he was happy that he had found another source of soul stones. Richter nodded to himself, and excitedly dropped in another amber gem. This time, there was a third line to the prompt. That would be fine, except they were all red this time. Red, in his experience, was only good in very specific scenarios: apples, carpets and drapes.

*Item already Accepted. Dungeon Loot already includes: **Common Soul Stone**.*

*Resource Not Accepted. As the Dungeon lacks the appropriate Room, **Common Soul Stone (filled with a Basic soul)** cannot be used as a Resource.*

Soul rejected! As the Dungeon lacks the appropriate Room, souls cannot be absorbed through the Well of Offering.

The filled soul stone still disappeared, but it was apparently wasted. Richter had chosen a *common* soul stone that was only filled with a *poor* quality soul, but still, he hated waste. Of course, the prompt didn't tell him what Room he needed to be able to offer souls to the Dungeon. From the fact that "Room" was capitalized, he assumed it was a specific area, rather than just four walls, a floor and a ceiling. When he focused on the word though another red prompt appeared.

Know This! Further information about the **Rooms** of your Dungeon is beyond your ken. Find a Dungeon Keeper to unlock additional functionality.

Richter heaved a big sigh. It seemed that his title of Dungeon Master was not as meaningful as he had initially thought. Unless he found a Dungeon Keeper, whatever that meant, his ability to interface with his latest village feature would remain limited. It also didn't escape his notice that the last prompt was a bit cheeky.

Luckily, Hisako came to the rescue again. She admitted there was much she didn't know, but it was still nice to at least know something.

"There are references to Rooms throughout Dungeon Lore, Lord Richter. They are specific areas in a Dungeon that increase its powers and

properties. From what I have read, Rooms can be almost any size and can give any number of abilities. Some are more or less common. One of the Rooms that seems to appear often in Dungeons is an Armory. It makes it more likely to encounter Dungeon creatures that carry weapons. I do not know if an Armory would affect your Dungeon in light of the fact that that your monsters are likely to be Beasts, but then I have heard of high level Beasts that wield weapons.”

“I still don’t get it,” Richter said. “Why would I ever want to build a Room like that?”

Hisako laughed slightly at the chaos seed’s naivete. “You do not actually have a choice, Lord Richter. The Dungeon is dangerous now, but it will become much deadlier over time. Rooms will be built according to its nature, not your desires. I recommend that you map it as often as possible to know what capabilities it can bring to bear.”

Richter nodded, disgruntled. He did not enjoy feeling out of control, and it was quickly becoming clear that being a Dungeon Master was a bit of a misnomer. That led him to his next question, “What do you know about Dungeon Keepers? I keep getting prompts saying that I can’t access certain properties if I don’t find one.”

Hisako shook her head, “The oldest books I have read, dating back

more than a thousand years, speak of Dungeon Keepers. Men and women who could unlock the true potential and power of Dungeons. There have been none recorded for years without end, however. The more recent texts posited that Dungeons Keepers used a magic now lost to The Land or that they never actually existed.”

Richter nodded. It wasn’t everything he wanted to know, but at least he had learned something. He had learned from the prompt that sacrificing souls to the Dungeon would one day be possible, presumably with some reward for doing so. Richter dropped a few more empty amber gems and received prompts that the dungeon could now produce *luminous* and *brilliant* soul stones as well. His curiosity satisfied, at least for the moment, he left well enough alone. The Dungeon sensed his intent and soon the bottomless hole disappeared, leaving only dirt in the Well of Offering.

Richter decided to examine the other feature in the room, the exit on the far side. As he walked closer, he could see that the shimmering field of energy covering it wasn’t exactly clear. It had a slightly red tint when viewed from certain angles. The field undulated in minute ways very quickly. Flashes of color came and went so fast that Richter’s eye processed the afterimage more than actual colors, so the color was lost almost immediately but the chaos seed was sure he had seen it. He looked back at Hisako, who just stared back at him with an expression that mirrored his own. Despite

everything that had just happened, they both possessed a craving for adventure. They were united in an excited curiosity as to what was on the other side of the curtain of energy. His fingers brushed the field.

Greetings, Dungeon Master! You are about to leave the safety of the **Entrance Chamber**. Know This! The dangers of the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos have been strengthened by your choices. At level one, the bonuses are:

The Harbinger's primary trait, **Camouflage**, is extended to all monsters and traps. At Dungeon level 1, they are 10% harder to detect.

The Item of Power, the **Chaotic Bloodstone**, has increased the health of every monster in the Dungeon. At Dungeon level 1, they receive a 10% bonus to Health.

The Item of Power, the **Chaotic Bloodstone**, has made the internal structure of the Dungeon **ephemeral**. There is a possibility of the Dungeon's layout changing each time someone enters it.

Know This! All Dungeon bonuses increase as the Dungeon gains levels.

Richter's eyes widened. Had he basically made the deadly dungeon of blood and chaos supersized? If he didn't know better, he would have thought that Hisako had conned him. She was the one that had convinced

him that making the Dungeon as powerful as possible was somehow a *good* thing. Having the Chaotic Bloodstone as the Item of Power was admittedly kind of his bad, but he had wanted to choose a squirrel or a chipmunk as the Harbinger. Richter still had no idea why the Hearth Mother had convinced him to choose an insanely powerful creature instead. It was a moot point though. There was nothing he could do about it now.

He was about to cross the energy field into the Dungeon proper when a voice rang out. One of the guards had entered the Dungeon and come down the winding ramp to find him. The slightly haunted look on her face was all Richter needed to see to know the *Doubt* debuff was in place. Still, she snapped a salute and relayed her message, “My Lord. The guards are assembled as you commanded. They are ready to bring our people home.”

For a few minutes, the excitement of exploring the Dungeon had distracted Richter. Now reality came crashing back. He still had to get his people back to safety. He still had to figure out what to do with hundreds of war refugees and... he had to bury his dead. Richter drew his hand back from the energy field. Exploring the Dungeon would have to wait. He sent the guard to let the warband know he would be there soon. As the woman ran off, the two Masters started walking back towards the surface.

When they reached the top, Richter turned to Hisako. He had seen something on the Dungeon interface that he thought might solve the *Doubt*

debuff. It was similar to the option he had to give people immunity to *Confusing Mists*. He added the Hearth Mother's name to give her immunity to the *Doubt* effect.

Once that was done, he told her about his discovery and asked her to drop whatever enchantment had inured her to the effect. She didn't see any real downside. They had already left the Dungeon and, even if they hadn't, she had come to trust this human. After she dismissed her spell, Hisako considered for a moment and then smiled, "Well done."

He started smiling as well, but it froze when the Hearth Mother's expression turned serious, "There is much left for us to discuss, Lord Richter. I must tell you, a feeling has been growing inside of me. I have a premonition that the trials we will soon face will make what we have been through before seem paltry in comparison, and we will need all of our strength and friendship to survive."

She sighed heavily and then forced a faint smile onto her face, "That can wait for the moment, however. I will attend to the freed prisoners and ensure that they are free of disease while you bring our armies home. You have led both our peoples through war and blood. Now you will lead them home, and tonight you will lead the loved ones of your fallen through sorrow. Travel fast and return quickly so that we may bury our dead."

CHAPTER 3 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



Richter left the village immediately, leading his small band through the forest and the mists. They moved at a fast clip. His War Leader Badge, *Movement Speed II*, provided a 20% boost to their travel as long as they remained in the trees. He was anxious to reconnect with the survivors of the goblin raid. The allied forces of the Mist Village and the Hearth Tree had utterly crushed their enemies. Still, Richter wouldn't feel comfortable until everyone was safely behind the village walls. The goblins might not be able to follow them into the mists, but dangerous monsters still prowled his domain.

Alma flew ahead with a message in her claws. The last thing he needed was to be attacked by his own forces. Richter had to imagine the nerves of both armies were frayed. If they saw another force speeding towards them they might panic. He would not allow a simple mistake to result in further loss of life.

While they passed through the forest, Richter felt as if something was

off. It took a while, but he realized that this was the first time in a great while that he was in a combat situation without either Alma or the shale adder by his side. Caulder and Sion were both still with him, but the chaos seed had come to rely on his pet and familiar more than he had realized. It felt... strange to be without them. He pressed on.

It wasn't long before he also wished there had been time to clean off the blood and gore. Even to him, he smelled like a day-old slaughterhouse. Richter could only imagine how his aroma was offending the others, but he wouldn't relax until his people were safely home. Even though the sun was up, his domain was full of dangers. The chaos seed had briefly considered jumping in the river before leaving. Then he'd figured the only thing worse than wearing armor covered in blood was wearing wet armor that was still mostly covered in blood.

Several minutes later, he decided to distract himself from the stink and itch by addressing the prompts still waiting for him since the battle. As he read the first notifications, his eyes grew wide.

Congratulations! By slaying **100** goblins, you have advanced your Title to **Goblin Slayer II**.

+8% attack and defense bonus when fighting goblins.

Kill a total of **250** goblins to reach next level.

Goblins will feel that your aura is soaked with the blood of their brethren.

+5% chance for goblins to mistrust, dislike or attack you.

+5% chance to intimidate goblins.

Congratulations! By slaying **250** goblins, you have advanced your Title to **Goblin Slayer III.**

+15% attack and defense bonus when fighting goblins.

Kill a total of **500** goblins to reach next level.

Goblins can sense the hundreds of their kind you have slaughtered.

+10% chance for goblins to mistrust, dislike or attack you.

+10% chance to intimidate goblins.

Congratulations! By slaying **500** goblins, you have advanced your Title to **Goblin Slayer IV.**

+24% attack and defense bonus when fighting goblins.

Kill a total of **1000** goblins to reach next level.

Your soul has been bathed in the black blood of goblins. How could they not recognize a mass murderer of their kind?

+20% chance for goblins to mistrust, dislike or attack you.

+20% chance to intimidate goblins.

Congratulations! By slaying **1,000** goblins, you have advanced your Title to **Goblin Slayer V**.

+35% attack and defense bonus when fighting goblins.

Kill a total of **2500** goblins to reach next level.

Your name will be whispered in fear, loathing and respect by goblins.

That one person could have butchered so many is something even a black-hearted goblin could admire.

+30% chance for goblins to mistrust, dislike or attack you.

+30% chance to intimidate goblins.

Had he really killed so many? The chaos seed had to search his feelings as he jogged through the trees. Richter had had no issues with taking lives during the last battle, but now, seeing it on the blood-red prompt... The sheer number of goblins dead by his hand was numbing.

The analytical part of him knew that he had only earned these titles because of the Bloodstone. While he had been possessed by the sentient item, the relic had harvested the blood of an entire army. Controlled or not, Richter couldn't help but wonder exactly how many lives he had taken.

He didn't have to wonder long. In response to his internal musings,

another prompt appeared:

SLAYER COUNT		
ENEMY	SLAIN	TITLE
Goblins	1, 134	Goblin Slayer V
Bugbears	42	Bugbear Slayer I

Richter almost cursed. His time in The Land was even bloodier than he'd thought. He had forgotten about the bugbears! It was true that they had attacked his village, and they deserved exactly what they'd gotten. It was also true however that more than half of the bugbears he had killed had not been in battle. After the mists had returned, the invaders had been more or less helpless. The fighting had turned into a slaughter. Even once the bugbears had been in full retreat, that had not been enough. He, along with Yoshi, Sion and Daniella, had killed dozens more. When they had finally returned to the village, all four of them had been drenched in blood and looked like monsters themselves. He looked down at his gore-covered form. In fact, he'd looked exactly like this. Was this what he was? A "Slayer?"

The chaos seed kept looking at the prompt. It was only a three-by-three grid, but it said so much. It did not even take into account all the

enemies he had killed. The humans, undead, monsters and beasts he had destroyed apparently did not merit inclusion in the list. Richter wondered what that said about The Land, if anything. He was fairly sure what it said about him, however. He was a killer.

Richter looked at his hands. They were dirty, but they weren't stained black with the blood of his enemies like the prompt seemed to suggest. He had to hope that the prompt was just being poetic about his soul being "bathed in black blood." A nagging part of him said that was not something that could be taken for granted in The Land though.

Richter called for a halt, letting the warband catch its breath. Richter closed his eyes and visualized his magical field, his aura, as Hisako had taught him. It still looked the same to him. With his eyes closed however, memories of screaming, pleading and crying enemies were recalled to his mind. Many of the goblins had not died well, and his blades had cut through countless hands that had been outstretched in futile pleas for mercy.

Richter firmed his will. He opened his eyes and dismissed the prompts. After a few deep breaths, he started to feel better. He was able to force the images of battle to the back of his mind and examine them analytically. He didn't take any real joy in the slaughter, but it also didn't bother him overly much. What was done was done. He would kill again, and it probably wouldn't be long before he did. As he centered himself, he

realized what was really bothering him: the fact that all the lives he had taken didn't actually make him feel bad. His internal questions felt almost vestigial. They were remnants from his earlier life on Earth and didn't serve a real purpose for who he was becoming. He had killed hundreds, literally hundreds, of sapient creatures. All he was really thinking though was that the boost to his attack and defense would make it much easier for him to advance his Title to "Slayer VI." A small part of him was screaming from the dark that it wasn't okay for him to be so cold, so apathetic. But it was a very, very small part of him.

Richter decided to just move on. It was done. Guilt and self-doubt were only useful if you intended to let them change your behavior. Good or bad, right or wrong, he planned to protect his village. He would forge a kingdom that was a beacon of light in The Land. He pushed aside the existential musing. There was work to be done.

The chaos seed got the war party moving again and started thinking about the practical implications of his new prompts. The increased likelihood to be mistrusted or attacked by goblins was somewhat problematic. On the other hand, it was a percentage boost. If he was able to form a positive relationship with a goblin, the base likelihood for being attacked would probably be quite low. Though with goblins he couldn't be sure. He had only met one goblin so far that hadn't tried to kill him on sight so maybe it wasn't

a big deal. He also had a fairly high Charisma thanks to the pixies and that might make up for it. All in all, the 35% bump to attack and defense against goblins was worth any drop in sex appeal as far as he was concerned. Richter had a feeling he'd be putting his new slayer title to work all too soon.

The warband was moving through the forest at a rapid clip. Caulder jogged along beside his liege, and he had kitted the guards for quick movement. Everyone was wearing leather armor. They had left their metal armor behind. The reason was not simply because the metal weighed more; chainmail was considered medium armor while leather was considered light armor. In addition to the extra energy it would take to move around in metal, the natural laws of The Land decreed that anyone wearing medium armor would have their speed decreased by 5% per piece. This meant that anyone wearing a full set of armor would be 30% slower than if they were completely unencumbered. Wearing the light armor only slowed them down by 3% per piece, even less if they had moved past novice rank in the Light Armor skill. The bottom line was that they were making good time but of course the trade-off was less defense. Richter just hoped they wouldn't run into anything... big.

Even though they weren't sprinting, they were moving at a steady jog. Richter was impressed that his guards were able to keep up. The training exercises they were doing with the sergeant each day were clearly

starting to pay off. The chaos seed turned his attention back to his prompts.

*For slaying 432 **Goblin Scouts**, you have been awarded 864 War Points.*

*For slaying 372 **Goblin Fighters**, you have been awarded 1116 War Points.*

*For slaying 169 **Goblin Grinders**, you have been awarded 676 War Points.*

*For slaying 38 **Professional Goblin Grinders**, you have been awarded 760 War Points. (War Points multiplied by 5 for slaying a Professional)*

*For slaying 1 **Specialist Goblin Grinder**, you have been awarded 40 War Points. (War Points multiplied by 10 for slaying a Specialist)*

*For slaying 3 **Specialist Goblin Rikkers**, you have been awarded 150 War Points. (War Points multiplied by 10 for slaying a Specialist)*

*For slaying 11 **Professional Goblin Ortai**, you have been awarded 660 War Points. (War Points multiplied by 10 for slaying a Specialist)*

*Total War Points Gained: **3150***

Richter's mouth fell slightly open as he saw the War Points stack up. He was on cloud nine again! Any concerns he had about slaughtering his enemies faded away when compared to the sweet point spendage he was about to do. That feeling lasted right up until he read his next prompt.

Scheisse!

*Know This! As a **Battle Sergeant** serving beneath a **Battle Leader**, you are*

only entitled to keep 50% of the total War Points earned. Total War Points Gained (Adjusted): 1,575

Know This! At your initiate rank in War Leader, War Points gained in a given engagement are capped at 1,000. Total War Points Gained (Adjusted): 1,000

Total War Points: 1051

The cap was a pain, but he still had another thousand to spend. Definitely nothing to sneeze at. Richter planned to put them to good use soon, but for now there were still more prompts to deal with.

*Congratulations! For killing **1023** enemies that were a lower level than you in a single battle, your Promotion **Weakness Equals Death I** has advanced to **Weakness Equals Death V**. Champions in your War Party have +25% attack and defense vs lower level opponents.*

*Congratulations! For butchering **128** enemy noncombatants in a single battle, your Promotion **Slaughter the Innocent I** has advanced to **Slaughter the Innocent II**. Killing noncombatants will increase the Fighting Spirit of your War Party for one hour. +10 Fighting Spirit for each life claimed.*

Bile rose in Richter's throat. Noncombatants? He remembered from history class that every army had support staff. Before that moment though, it hadn't occurred to him that the Bloodstone's spell had harvested goblins

that weren't even fighters or casters. Despite his earlier resolve, this *did* bother him a bit. He spat to the side in an attempt to remove the taste from his mouth. Unconsciously, the chaos seed's speed picked up, as if he were trying to outrun the past. Caulder asked if anything was amiss, but Richter just motioned curtly with one hand for the rest of the warband to keep up.

The next series of prompts dealt with field promotions. Since he had gotten to the rank of *initiate* in his War Leader skill, those serving beneath him could earn perks if they distinguished themselves in battle. It was limited unfortunately by the fact that Richter's war party could only include eleven people, not counting his Companions. It was nothing compared to the thousand people Yoshi could lead as a *journeyman* war leader, but every little bit helped.

In the last phase of the battle, while the rest of his army was fighting off goblins, trolls, and two gigantic monsters, Richter had formed his war party. It had included Terrod, Sion, Caulder and nine other allied soldiers. Four of them had died, something else that hung heavily upon him. He was pleased and surprised though that the remaining six had earned field advancements. Rushing through the forest, he couldn't administer them, but he had already thought of a good moment to do so in the future.

His next prompts showed that there were clear benefits to butchering hundreds of people. The Land did not judge.

*Know This! In this new **Age of Chaos**, all beings of Chaos will be awarded Chaos Points as they level commensurate to their alignment.*

A cascade of prompts appeared before him showing his leveling from the last battle. Even to Richter, it looked jumbled. To his surprise, right after he had that thought, the information realigned into table format. Why didn't I do this before, he bemoaned. The sadness only lasted for a split second though. He had more points to spend!

TRING! TRING! TRING!

*You have reached levels **33, 34** and **35**! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. You are awarded the following points to distribute:*

	Per Level	Total
Stat Points	As a Chaos Seed, you gain 6 Stat Points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4	18
Talent Points	As a Chaos Seed, you receive 15 Talent Points instead of the usual 10. You receive an additional 15 Talent Points from your Profession and Specialty for having a 100% affinity in Enchanting	161
Chaos Points	You receive 8 Chaos Points due to your Blessing by the Lords of Chaos	122

Skill %	+25% to the skill of your choice	+75%
Points		

Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

*Now that you have progressed more than one level, you must allocate your **Stat and Skill Percentage** points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.*

Seeing the advancements in his level brought a small smile to his face. It was also satisfying to know that he was earning Chaos points. Whatever the hell those were. And just who were the Lords of Chaos and what “Blessing” had they bestowed? Were they gods? He had ended the previous age that was called the “Epoch of *Banished* Gods” after all.

Richter shook his head. Leveling was wonderful, but it was more than slightly irritating to once again be confronted with something new. The Land seemed determined to throw his ignorance in his face. What the hell was he supposed to do with Chaos points? A *slight*, ever so small facet of himself rejoiced in the increase of his level. He dismissed that thought a second later as he remembered what he had done to earn the boost. The fact that he forgot so easily, even for a moment, disturbed him most of all. Scowling now, he focused on what to do with his points. Anything to shut up

the small voice inside of him.

As he and his guards continued to run, Richter brought up his status page.

Name: Richter	Level: 35, 28%	Age: 24
Race: Chaos Seed (Human)	Profession: Enchanter	Languages: Sapient Mortals
Reputation: Lvl 5 “You are a man worth following.”	Specialty: Essence	Alignment: Chaotic (2) Neutral
STATS		
Health: 712	Mana: 602	Stamina: 350
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 33 <i>(base: 25 + items: 8)</i>	Agility: 32	Dexterity: 38 <i>(base: 23 + items: 15)</i>
Constitution: 56 <i>(base: 56 + mark: 1%)</i>	Endurance: 35	Intelligence: 51
Wisdom: 45	Charisma: 34 <i>(base: 30 + Honorable: 4)</i>	Luck: 22
RESISTANCES		
TYPES OF MAGIC		
Air 50%	Earth 25%	Fire 10%
Life 50%	Mental 55%	Spiritual 5%
	Blood 5%	
SCHOOLS OF MAGIC		
Enchantment 32%		
SKILLS		
MARTIAL SKILLS		
Archery: 17, 76% <i>Double Shot:</i> 2, 11% <i>Imbue Arrow:</i> 17, 29%	War Leader: 15, 40% <i>Army of One:</i> 3,	Unarmed Combat: 1, 78% <i>Pressure Points:</i> 1, 0%

<i>Drill Shot: 2, 81%</i> <i>Focus: 6, 13%</i>	87% <i>Beacon: 11, 79%</i> <i>Inspiring</i> <i>Leadership: 8, 56%</i>	Light Armor: 16, 29% <i>Grace in Combat: 14, 83%</i>
Dual Wield: 10, 36%	Riding: 7, 76%	Swordsmanship: 1, 43%
Tracking: 15, 88%	Small Blades: 13, 18%	
MAGIC SKILLS		
Air Magic: 15, 22%	Earth Magic: 11, 61%	Water Magic: 5, 96%
Dark Magic: 8, 98%	Light Magic: 7, 61%	Fire Magic: 12, 38%
Life Magic: 11, 61%	Death Magic: 3, 51%	Dual Cast: 12, 35%
Spiritual: 1, 92%	Blood Magic: 12, 77%	
ROGUE SKILLS		
Traps: 25, 72% <i>Trap Disarm: 22, 48%</i>	Stealth: 14, 9%	Pierce the Veil: 25, 68%
CRAFTING SKILLS		
Enchanting: 48, 5%	Brewing: 3, 57%	Construction: 4, 82%
Crafting: 5, 29%	<i>Distillation: 3, 57%</i>	<i>Masonry: 3, 38%</i>
Smithing: 6, 73%	Alchemy: 2, 48%	<i>Carpentry: 4, 47%</i>
Scribing: 5, 14%		
MISCELLANEOUS SKILLS		
Administration: 9, 60% <i>Lead From The Front: 6, 28%</i>	Self-Awareness: 14, 9%	Animal Husbandry: 2, 43% <i>Exotic Beasts: 2, 26%</i>
Diplomacy: 3, 78% <i>Coercion: 1, 82%</i>	Beast Bonding: 8, 23%	Trade: 16, 77%

	Herb Lore: 40, 72%	Analyze: 15, 57%
ABILITIES		
Limitless: 100% affinity in any and every skill Gift of Tongues: Ability to comprehend almost any sapient languages Fast Learner: +30% to speed of skill advancement Bounty of Life: +30% growth for the physical manifestation of your Place of Power Psi Bond: +40% Mental Resistance Maximum Communication Distance 1250 yards Eye contact offers the chance to connect with other creatures in a limited way		
QUALITIES		
Resolute: +5% Spiritual Resistance, +5% Thought Resistance Honorable II: +4 Charisma Implacable: Awarded <i>Initiate</i> rank in Tracking Skill		
MARKS		
Master of the Mist Village	Blood Oath of Vengeance	Forge of Heavens
Dragonkin	Adventurer	Blood and Chaos

Before he even thought about anything else, Richter dumped his 75% skill bonus into Enchanting. It wasn't enough to get him to a new skill level, but it got him most of the way there. Then he minimized the skill section of his status page. Limitless was an amazing ability, but it made it hard to even keep track of his own skills. He put three of his Characteristic points into Luck. It might just be a strange quirk, but he believed in good fortune. Always had.

That still left the question of what to do with his remaining fifteen stat points. Strength was an option, but as short blades were his weapon of choice, speed and precision mattered just as much in regard to his combat damage. The points were probably better used elsewhere. Agility and Dexterity were both tempting, but the chaos seed wanted something that translated into better stats: health, mana and stamina. That left Constitution, Endurance and Intelligence.

More health was always a good thing, but he was already fairly high with seven hundred and twelve points. He also had several rings that augmented that. Endurance, on the other hand, was something he was lacking in. During the battle, he had burned through stamina at a prodigious rate. Time and again his green bar had come close to bottoming out. Richter had learned that when his stamina ran dry, his reaction time turned to garbage. He didn't completely lose consciousness every time, but even with his high level he became easy pickings for any enemy with a hard-on and a need to use it.

It wasn't an insurmountable problem though. Having a bag full of stamina potions had been a good workaround for that. As long as the Dragon's Cauldron could keep him supplied, it wasn't a huge issue yet. What he really needed was the ability to cast more spells in the heat of battle. Of course, the easiest fix for that was...

Richter nodded to himself as he ran. If his Intelligence was a cock-meat sandwich, he was about to add some bacon! He placed all fifteen points into that stat and the hue of his mana bar shifted to a deeper blue. The warband kept running.

His next prompts dealt with his skills.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 13, 14 and 15 in **Analyze**. For reaching level 15, you have unlocked a new facet of your skill. In addition to the information you already receive, you will now also be provided with a list of the target's skills, including the special abilities of non-humanoid creatures.*

Hell yeah! Fighting new monsters was always potentially deadly. Even a small creature could have some insane capability that could knock you on your ass. If he could know what monsters could do before engaging, it would be clutch! The slow leveling of his Analyze skill was one of the main downsides of living in the sticks. He didn't get any skill progress for analyzing the same person over and over. If he was in a major city, it would probably already be skill level thirty or forty. Still, he was happy he'd finally unlocked a new facet of the skill. Richter dismissed the prompt and went on to the next.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 23, 24 and 25 in **Traps**. All*

traps +50% more effective, +50% less likely to be found.

*Congratulations! You have advanced from Initiate to Apprentice in: **Traps**.*

Your skill in this field has advanced to the point that you can now store known spells in your traps. Use this new rank bonus with caution. The materials of your traps must be up to the task of containing the magical energy you invest in them.

Richter's eyes widened. What? He could make magical traps now? The possibilities seemed endless. He could tie a sleep spell to a dart trap. Or better yet, a fireball! The only problem was that he had barely any traps left. In fact, he only had one, the shrink trap. He had to hope that someone in his village had the expertise to build more. Still, the fact that he could tie his magic into traps now was very interesting...

More notifications awaited.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 13 in **Small Blades**. +26% attack speed while using small blades. +26% bonus to damage while using small blades.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 10 in **Dual Wield**. Base accuracy penalty in primary hand reduced to 15% and in off hand by 40%. Dual attack speed increased by 10%.*

*Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in: **Dual***

Wield. *You may now use a normal-sized weapon in conjunction with a small blade without any extra penalty.*

*You have received 2,500 (base 2,000 x 1.25) bonus experience for reaching level 10 in the skill: **Dual Wield.***

The progression in Dual Wield was welcome as well. He had gotten used to fighting with two weapons at once, but he still felt off balance as he fought. His initiate rank in Small Blades helped by decreasing the penalty in both hands by 5%, but he had still completely whiffed some of his swings during the last battle. The goblins had been so closely packed that he had still struck home most of the time, but time and again his blades struck armor instead of the gaps that would have let him pierce vital areas instead. He would probably be deadlier with only one weapon and increased accuracy, but once he leveled up Dual Wield, the extra combat speed would make him a real beast. He was planning for the future, and hoping he didn't get his ass kicked too badly in the now. Which pretty much summed up both his gaming style and general approach to life.

Besides, compared to most of the opponents he faced, his gear was top-notch and his stats were strong. His accuracy penalty didn't matter too much when he was wielding an elementum blade against fur-clad goblin scouts. Richter made sure not to lose sight of the fact that there were incredibly powerful foes waiting out there for him. He had accomplished

amazing things, but much of his success was because he'd been smart enough and lucky enough to cultivate strong friends and allies. It hadn't been Richter of the Mist Village that killed the goblin commander, after all. It had been Yoshi of the Hearth Tree.

He went back to his prompts. He'd advanced in even more skills. Whatever else could be said about the battle, it had advanced him on all fronts.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 16 in **Light Armor**. +32% to defense of all light armor.*

*Congratulations! You have reached subskill level 14 in **Grace in Combat**. Dodge increased by 28% while wearing all Light Armor.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 11 and 12 in **Dual Casting**. Chance of spell miscast decreased by increasing this skill. This number is affected directly by spell level and caster's proficiency in that branch of magic. Specific changes:*

	Level Changes	Current Values
Spell Power	Increases 4%	+148%
Mana Cost	Decreases by 2% from base +300%	+276%

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 in **Beast Bonding**. +8% effectiveness to Tame. +8% attack and defense of bonded creatures.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 15 in **Air Magic**. New spells are now available.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 11 in **Life Magic**. New spells are now available.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 11 in **Earth Magic**. New spells are now available.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 12, 13, 14, and 15 in **War Leader**. Sphere of Influence +15% larger. +15% attack and defense for all allies within your Sphere of Influence.*

*Congratulations! You have reached subskill levels 10 and 11 in **Beacon**. +110 to the Fighting Spirit of war party.*

*Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in: **Beacon**. Killing an enemy Champion will now give +2 Strength to everyone in your war party for one hour.*

You have received 1,250 (base 1,000 x 1.25) bonus experience for reaching

level 10 in the subskill: **Beacon**.

*Congratulations! You have reached subskill levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 in **Inspiring Leadership!** +40% to chance of war party members earning Field Advancements. +8% to the power of Field Advancements of any party members under your command or the command of your subordinates.*

One final prompt awaited him. Something that had taken entirely too long.

Congratulations! You have completed a Quest: **Protect the Forest I**
Bugbears and goblins have been invading the Forest of Nadria and disrupting the balance of the Forest. You have struck a massive blow against the goblin invaders, but have also revealed that the forces arrayed against you are more powerful than anyone imagined. The battle has been won, but the war is far from over. Grow your strength, young Master; your life will depend upon it. See the Hearth Mother for your reward.

Know This! You have failed the optional condition of the Quest: **Protect the Forest I**. You have not discovered why the invaders are coming into the forest. As the Quest is much larger than even Hisako intended, she may give you an extension to this condition if you speak with her.

Richter closed the last prompt. Months that felt like years had passed since he had obtained the quest. He had not even unlocked his second power when the Hearth Mother had charged him with destroying an enemy camp. It seemed like forever ago that Sion had given him a cocky grin and said, "This is what we do, brother." Richter thought back to his best friend's prophetic words. The sprite had been right. Death and warfare was what they did, but it came at a cost. The losses his people had suffered weighed heavily on the chaos seed.

He pushed off such dark thoughts. Turning his head, he stole a glance at his men. More than a few were red-faced and sweating buckets, but not one of them asked to stop. If his soldiers could push themselves without complaint, then he sure as hell could too! If the price to protect his people was an ocean of blood, then he would pay it gladly.

Richter realized that over the past hour he had increased the speed of the warband from a jog to a run as he dealt with his own inner turmoil. Well, he was done with all that. At least for now. The chaos seed raised a hand and called a halt. His soldiers slowed down and then came to a grateful stop. One or two looked longingly at the ground, just wanting to lay down, but Caulder was the perfect sergeant. He walked around, speaking to his soldiers in his barking voice. He handed out claps on the back and kicks in the ass with equal measure, giving each man and woman exactly what they needed to

stay strong and alert. While his warband recovered their stamina, the chaos seed looked off through the mist and wondered what waited for him.

CHAPTER 4 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



They started moving again a few minutes later. Richter didn't want his men to fully cool down and cramp. After a nod to Caulder, the sergeant was once again spitting orders and epithets at them. His particular brand of harsh love had them up in no time, and soon the warband was running again. While they moved, Richter decided how to allocate his War Leader points.

Badge	Cost	Description (applies to entire party)
Melee Attack I (Closed)	25	+5% to melee attacks
Melee Defense I (Closed)	25	+5% to melee defense
Ranged Attack I (Closed)	25	+5% to ranged attacks
Ranged Defense I	25	+5% to ranged defense

(Closed)		
Magical Strength I (Closed)	25	+3% to magical strength *Must specify spell school upon acquisition. May only choose spell school used during battle leading a War Party.
Magical Strength III (Life) (Closed)	100	+9% to Life magical strength *Must specify spell school upon acquisition. May only choose spell school used during battle leading a War Party.
Magical Defense I (Closed)	25	+2% to magical defense *Must specify spell school upon acquisition. May only choose spell school used during battle leading a War Party.
Skilled Positions (Independent)	400 to unlock each	Available Positions: Tank III: LOCKED Scout III: LOCKED Healer III: LOCKED
Lead by Example II (Personal)	300	LOCKED
Movement Speed I (Open)	100	+10% Movement Speed *Must specify terrain type upon acquisition. May only choose terrain type that the War party has traveled on.

Movement Speed III (Forest) (Open)	400	+30% Movement Speed in Forests
Favored Enemy I (Open)	250	<p>When fighting a favored enemy:</p> <p>+10% Melee and Ranged Attack and Defense</p> <p>+6% Magical Strength (all Basic Elements)</p> <p>+4% Magical Defense (all Basic Elements)</p> <p><small>*Must specify enemy upon badge acquisition. May only choose enemies which have been fought while leading a War Party. Only one favored enemy per War Party formation.</small></p>
Favored Enemy II (Goblin) (Open)	500	<p>When fighting goblins:</p> <p>+20% Melee and Ranged Attack and Defense</p> <p>+12% Magical Strength (all Basic Elements)</p> <p>+8% Magical Defense (all Basic Elements)</p> <p><small>*Only one favored enemy per War Party formation.</small></p>
Trainer I (Closed)	250	+5% experience earned for War Party members

Power Level II (Closed)	250	20% of the experience earned by the entire war party can be channeled to a specific member. The third rank of this badge allows the recipient to be three times beyond the Sphere of Influence and still receive the experience. <small>*Experience recipient must be within Sphere of Influence</small>
Sphere of Influence II (Personal)	500	Increase range of Sphere of Influence by 200%

*Total War Points Remaining: **1051**.*

The thousand and fifty-one War Points opened up a good number of options for him. The first thing on his mind was that Yoshi had told him that he was a fool for not having invested in defense or attack. With the points he had to spend now, he could buy up to the fifth rank in melee or ranged badges. That would translate to +25% attack or defense for himself and for anyone in his war party. Nothing to sneeze at. It could keep a sword blade from penetrating a breastplate, or help his people claim an enemy's life.

Some of his other badges were still locked until he reached his next

rank in War Leader, so those were out. *Favored Enemy II* drew his eye again though. The next rank was expensive at five hundred points, but the bonuses really stacked up. The fact that they would apply to anyone within his Sphere of Influence, and not just to the eleven that he could include in his own war party, was also a big selling point. He thought about it for another few seconds before shaking his head though. Richter had more enemies than just goblins. He decided to hold off on purchasing another rank.

Trainer and *Power Level* were always good, but he decided what he really wanted was greater mobility. His domain was about three hundred square miles. History had always shown that empires that could travel quickly were able to achieve great things. It was an *open* badge, so it could help him immediately, unlike *closed* badges where he'd have to wait a full day for the purchase to be useful. He made his decision.

*Congratulations! You have purchased the War Badge: **Movement Speed III**. The movement speed of any friendlies within your Sphere of Influence is increased by 30%.*

*Total War Points Remaining: **651***

The warband's speed picked up immediately. Richter's steps through the underbrush felt more sure, and the thickets they had to run through suddenly seemed less dense. He would have bought the next rank as well if

possible, but he was almost a hundred points shy. It was tempting to spend the rest of the points now, but he decided to hold off. There was always time to buy more later.

At the speed they were moving at, the war party had to pause several more times. Stamina depletion was a real danger. Richter's stats weren't built for prolonged battles like a Professed Warrior, but his high level still meant his Endurance was higher than almost any of the village guards. He railed internally at the delay, but his people would be slaughtered if a monster attacked while they were exhausted. Richter just focused on the task at hand.

As the hours passed, they moved deeper into the forest. Richter had almost started to think that they would reach the army unmolested when a horrible clacking split the silence of the mists. Caulder heard the noise at the same time and barked out a command, "Form up! Fort formation! Shields front! I said form *up*! Move faster! Banished gods, I'll find you another job that involves touching shit with your hands! Move your asses!"

The training the guards had received showed. They were no polished special ops team, but with a minimal amount of shoving and bungling, they got into formation. Richter gritted his teeth. Even though they were performing well, it didn't change the fact that his men were equipped for speed, not battle. Few of them had shields, and the only long weapons they

had were eight simple spears. Still, they were ready to fight, and Richter would stand with them.

The sixteen melee guards formed a square, four to a side, with Richter, two bowmen and a biomage on the inside of the formation. Each scanned the forest, their hearts thudding in their chests. Before the last man was set, the chaos seed had an arrow knocked to his bow. A golden glow sprung into existence. Another loud roar split the forest. The sound of breaking branches could clearly be heard coming from the southwest, and it was getting louder.

Richter reached for the spot in his mind that held his mental connection to Alma. She was too far away for him to speak with her, but he could still call upon her power. His Enhanced Imbue Arrow skill did not require his familiar to be close by, just that they be bonded. Blue-white crackles began to dance across the golden aura of his imbued arrow. Black streaks had appeared on the golden aura in the next second. Two seconds after that, the beasts came into view. Richter let out a snarl as he saw what they were facing

There were four of them in all. Each was on four legs and moved like a hunting cat. Their faces were reminiscent of a lion, but their lower jaws protruded like a bulldog's. Two large tusks extended up for ten inches on either side of their mouths. They were four and a half feet tall at the neck,

and their shoulders had hardened bone over them as armor. Two large bone horns extended from their shoulder blades and curved forward to either side of their heads like ramming spikes.

One was larger than the others and Richter identified it as the pack leader. Even as he poured mana into his arrow as quickly as he could, he spared five MP to use *Analyze*.

Name: Alpha Dreemar **Disposition:** Irritable

An Alpha Dreemar leads its pack. These territorial animals are aggressive, but normally keep to themselves. The hardened bone armor and large tusks speak to its favored attack of ramming opponents and then goring them once they are on the ground. The Alpha can drive the other members of the pack into a rage, greatly increasing their attack and decreasing their response to pain.

Level: 19

Health: 610 **Mana:** 30 **Stamina:** 740

Strength: 49

Agility: 17

Dexterity: 14

Constitution: 61

Endurance: 74

Intelligence: 3

Wisdom: 2

Charisma: 3

Luck: 10

Richter's eyes widened as he saw its high Strength and even higher Constitution. The things would knock his men over like bowling pins! Struggling not to lose concentration as more than four hundred and fifty

mana was now invested in the gold and black aura around his arrow, he gave a terse command. “Break the formation! Don’t meet the charge!”

He could spare no more words. The aura around the arrow had taken on the barbershop-pole appearance of gold swirled with black, and blue-white psychic energy crackled ominously across the surface. It shook on the string in an imitation of life, eager to fulfill its destiny and kill. Since evolving his Imbue Arrow skill Richter could channel the mana with much greater ease, but the possibility of losing control still existed.

Caulder looked askance at his lord after the order, but only for a moment. Years of service had taught the sergeant the importance of following orders in combat. The look of intense concentration on Richter’s face spoke volumes.

“You heard his lordship! Break into strike teams! Do not let these things charge right at you. Use the trees for cover! If you die, you’re on latrine duty for a month!”

The square immediately split apart. The guards formed into five-man groups and scattered to the right and left. The charging dreemar barely noticed. They apparently took a bright shining light as a challenge. On the one hand, that meant his people could get out of the way, which was wonderful. On the other, all four were barreling right at Richter, which in his

opinion fucking sucked!

The hooves of the beasts churned the forest floor as they stayed tight in formation. Several tons of flesh bore down on Richter as he placed all of his faith into the first magical attack he had ever learned. With his newly improved Intelligence, he was able to pour more mana into his shot than he'd ever used before. He silently counted how much, and wished his pool wasn't draining at such a prodigious rate.

561 mana... 597 mana... What the fuck am I doing? 614 mana...

The dreemar were close enough that he could see their nostrils flaring. The only thing that had kept his ass from already being run over was that the powerful creatures had a low Agility and Dexterity. Still, he decided he'd probably invested enough.

Richter's teeth were bared in defiance as he finally released. He had maximized the secondary effects of his Enhanced Imbue Arrow skill after only two hundred mana. The extra six hundred were for stopping power. The arrow held so much magic that it had been bucking on the string like a vibrator on PCP. When he released, the alpha dreemar was only twenty yards away. The arrow shot forward like a coiled snake, crossing the space in the blink of an eye. Everyone heard the *BOOM* of the explosion a moment before they felt the compression wave. Richter was rocked back, but the

effect on the dreemar was much more profound.

BEGIN COMBAT LOG

Alpha Dreemar suffers from Mind Fog.

Alpha Dreemar is Stunned.

Alpha Dreemar suffers from Psi Crystallization.

Richter strikes Alpha Dreemar with Enhanced Imbue Arrow for 909 points of varied damage (base Piercing=40, base Magical Force=263): {[(+16 Recurve Bow of the Wood Sprite + 8 Moonstone Arrow – 5 Armor) + 34% for level 17 Archery + 76% for 38 points of Dexterity] + [(614 Mana/5 -5 Armor) + 85% for level 17 Imbue Arrow + 38% familiar level]} x 3 Critical Hit for Pierced Lung. 6-foot radius AoE Damage (not including modifiers): 263.

Richter has slain Alpha Dreemar!

END COMBAT LOG

The arrow pierced its chest, scoring a critical hit. Richter had no idea about all the complex calculations that had gone into the blow, he just knew he'd fucked that thing up! His moonstone arrow, coupled with the already

respectable damage range of his Recurve Bow of the Wood Sprite, had serious stopping power, but that was nothing compared to the magical damage of the imbued arrow. The sprites' racial skill was costly. It drained almost his entire mana pool and so couldn't be repeated, but for a one-off attack, you couldn't do better.

The already magnified damage from the arrow crumpled the dreemar alpha's face inward, leaving a bloody ruin. Its horn broke with a snap that was drowned out by the concussive boom of the imbued arrow. It plowed into the ground face first, its back legs finishing a final push before the body registered that the brain had been destroyed.

The AoE of Richter's Enhanced Imbue Arrow had been greatly increased since the skill had evolved. It was now determined by the power of his familiar. At Alma's vaunted level of thirty-eight, the AoE of his shot was now a staggering six feet. It meant that his imbued arrows could wreak serious havoc upon grouped enemies. Despite his powerful attack, the damage he could cause was still subject to physics. The force of the blast was greatly absorbed by the heavy body of the alpha dreemar, and the fact that the animals had been charging in a wedge formation. The magical force pulverized muscle and internal organs. It even cracked the creature's reinforced bone. Yet even in death the alpha performed one last service for its pack: the bulky meat of its carcass protected them from the worst of the

damage of Richter's strike.

Its physical body did nothing to shield the pack from the secondary effects of Richter's enhanced attack, however. His connection with Alma let him channel the Deep Magic of Thought into his strikes. These effects were also tied to the level of his familiar and had three tiers: *Mind Fog*, *Stun* and *Psi Crystallization*. The remaining dreemar were all affected by *Mind Fog*, causing them to become disoriented and unable to focus. One of them was also *Stunned* and it crashed to the ground. The third effect was what Richter had truly been hoping for, however.

The stunned dreemar and one other now had blue-white crystals floating near their heads. *Psi Crystallization* summoned the glowing jewels, which made any afflicted creature more susceptible to psychic attack and Thought magic. Without Alma around that did not mean much in the here and now, but the jewels had a secondary effect. If a creature was killed before the gems disappeared, the crystal would capture its mental energy. That could lead to some interesting possibilities down the road.

With the alpha dead and another stunned, that left just two beasts on their feet. They were both bellowing in anger and confusion. Richter did not give them time to recover. Despite the mana headache that was making the edges of his vision blurry, the chaos seed shouldered his bow. He downed two mana potions and rushed forward. Though he hated wasting two potions

on this minor battle, he was already running on fumes and night would fall soon. He needed to end this skirmish as soon as possible and get to his people.

Richter ran at the dreemar, needing to get much closer to be within the effective range of the spell he wished to cast. When he did so, the strike teams moved forward to attack the beasts with their liege. Before they could get too close the chaos seed told them to hold back though. Caulder's nostrils flared, but he and the other guards obeyed.

One of the disoriented dreemar saw Richter approaching and decided that was a good enough reason to attack. Before it could even get going however, he got off his spell. A green glow surrounded the fingers on one of his hands, and a ten-foot-wide circle of grease appeared under the dreemar. Both promptly fell to the ground with a crash and squeals of protest. His headache started causing actual pain as his mana bar dropped again. The mana potion restored one hundred and ninety-seven MP, but it was like taxing a system that had already been in the red. His jaw tightened as he fought against the sensation.

Part of Richter wanted to tame one of the beasts. He had felt strangely naked since sacrificing his shale adder to the Dungeon, but he reminded himself that he still had men and women out in the forest who he needed to escort home. Also, the psi crystals could not be harvested if he left

the creatures alive. He watched the monsters slipping and roaring in the grease while his mana bar recharged. A few seconds later, it had regenerated enough for his purposes. Silently cursing the pain he was about to feel, he began. Green light suffused his hands as he dual cast *Weak Rending Talons*.

He'd been right. It didn't feel good, but it had also been worth it. A swirling storm of claws, nails and talons appeared around the three beasts. The scratch of any one hook didn't do much damage, but the spell reached every bit of bare flesh. Soon, blood was flying through the air and the confused beasts panicked completely. One gored the stunned dreemar while the other became hysterically agitated. It fell again and again trying to escape the AoE of Richter's *Grease* spell.

The chaos seed desperately wanted to light the grease on fire. *Weak Flame* and *Grease* was pretty much his favorite spell combo, but he hadn't forgotten the last time he had used Fire magic indiscriminately in the forest. It had taken several mages summoning rainstorms the better part of an hour to put out the fires. Instead, he cast a final attack spell, *Weak Cloying Darkness*. A cone of pure darkness shot from his hand and bathed all three dreemar. Casting the spell in the day decreased its power somewhat, but the heavy tree canopy preserved much of the effect. The Dark magic bathed the creatures, causing no damage but decreasing their attack and movement speed by 20%.

Richter called out to his men, “Let my spell do its work, but if they escape the grease, kill them quickly.”

The strike teams moved to surround the ring of grease and talons, but stayed a healthy distance back from the actual AoE. As if Richter’s words were prophetic though, one of the dreemar broke free. It dashed away, squealing and bleeding. It dodged between two of the five-man squads and, thankfully, none of the guards were foolish enough to try and stand in its path. Two did manage to spear it though, as it moved past. With a curse, Richter realized it was one of the dreemar with a psi crystal.

“Kill it!” he called out. Ten of his people rushed after it, and one of the archers managed to sink an arrow into its back leg. The limb went lame and it crashed into the nearby brush, disappearing from sight. Richter could still hear the fading sound of breaking branches, so he knew it remained on its feet. His guards gave chase and soon they were also hidden by the trees.

The biomancer cast *Soul Trap* on the remaining dreemar. The *Stun* debuff had worn off on one of them when it had been attacked by the other. The two animals were now locked in a brutal fight, completely ignoring anything else. From the outside, they just looked like a ball of fur, claws, horns and blood. The chaos was worsened by Richter’s *Weak Rending Talons* spell that was still siphoning health from both of them at a steady rate.

The strike teams stood ready in case the animals broke out of the spell fields, but the dreemar stayed focused on one another. The archers nocked arrows, but waited when Richter motioned for them to be still. His mana had risen above one hundred points. Not enough for what he wanted to do, but luckily, he was the Master of the Mist Village. He set a Sprite Arrow of Nature to the string and began imbuing. Pulling on the village mana pool, he invested the required two hundred mana needed to maximize the *Psi Crystallization* effect of his skill and released.

A second *BOOM* shook the forest and the two weakened creatures collapsed, dead. Twin swirls of rainbow light rose into the air. The lights mirrored each other like mating dragonflies, gracefully weaving through the trees until they circled back and disappeared into Richter's Bag of Holding.

<p>You have captured:</p> <p>Soul of a Dreemar x 2</p>	<p>Durability: 20/20</p> <p>Item Class: Common</p> <p>Stone Level: Common</p> <p>Soul Level: Common</p> <p>Status: Filled</p> <p>Weight: 0.3 kg</p>
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Richter dismissed both the *Grease* and *Weak Rending Talons* spells.

The second one especially was just making a mess as it continued to score against the dead bodies. Even though he had come to enjoy battle, cutting up dead bodies over and over was just... gross and unnecessary. He heard a final squeal of pain off to the left as his strike teams ended the life of the last dreemar. It sounded like the beast had made it at least another hundred yards before they'd taken it down. Caulder was with them though, and Richter was confident his sergeant would bring back the psi crystal. His men should have killed the beast well before the *Psi Crystallization* effect faded.

The chaos seed planned to summon a few mist workers to carry the dreemar carcasses back to the village just as soon as his mana replenished. As it was he had a slight headache from almost completely depleting his pool. Richter could have simply used the village mana again, but he'd already used a hundred MP. The village only regenerated forty-two mana per hour. Drawing from that reservoir of magic was not something he did lightly ever since his poor judgement had allowed bugbears to attack his village. The deaths of that night still weighed heavily upon him. It was better to wait a few minutes until his own mana pool refilled. Besides, he had psi crystals to find!

The bodies of the two dreemar were somewhat messy, but Richter was able to recover the glowing blue-white crystals without difficulty. His second imbued shot had gotten the job done, and the stunned dreemar had

developed a crystal a scant moment before death. Richter reached into his bag and pulled out a skin of water. After pouring some down his parched throat, he rinsed off the crystals and looked at them with immense satisfaction.

<p>You have found: Psi Crystal</p>	<p>Durability: 10/10</p> <p>Item Class: Scarce</p> <p>Level: 14</p> <p>Weight: 0.9 kg.</p> <p>Traits: This crystal is the captured psychic energy of a level 14 Dreemar. This energy can be utilized by Mental creatures to boost their growth and stats. The energy may also be used by anyone with access to Mental magic to greatly augment their spells. It can also be used by Mental creatures to augment their capabilities for a short time. Any usage will consume the energy all at once. Further uses of this energy may be possible and will have to be discovered.</p>
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<p>You have found:</p>	<p>Durability: 10/10</p> <p>Item Class: Scarce</p>
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Psi Crystal	Level: 18
	Weight: 0.9 kg.
	Traits: ...

He knew a dragonling that would absolutely love to get her hands on these. Richter slipped them both into his bag and waited for his men to return. He was about to summon a mist worker when he heard a large amount of shouting coming from the direction the dreemar had run in. There was a shout of pain, but it was tinged with anger, not the fury of battle. In fact, what it really sounded like was like was a cry of intense frustration and irritation. Still, everyone hefted their weapons and prepared for the worst. Then Richter heard Caulder's voice, "Get that slippery bastard! He took it!"

There was a parting of the underbrush like a figure was running through it, but all Richter saw of the runner was a faint distortion in the air. At first, an irrational part of him thought, "Oh shit! Predator!" Then the conscious part of his mind realized he was being a moron. He wasn't even in a jungle. What was actually happening was that his Pierce the Veil skill was letting him see a stealthed figure.

The stealth faded away as though the now-revealed man had stepped through a waterfall. First his arm, then his head, then the rest of his body

came into view. The little guy was booking! Moments later, the two strike teams that had gone after the dreemar emerged from the trees as well, looking mad as hell. Richter watched the small man they were chasing, both confused and bemused. Their quarry was only four and a half feet tall, and his build was that of a fourteen-year-old boy. Though flushed with exertion, the man's skin was fair, and despite his youthful face Richter could tell he was no child. Slightly overlarge ears tapered up to a soft point on either side of his head, and his chestnut hair was pulled back in a ponytail that bounced behind him as he ran.

The strike teams that had stayed with Richter moved to intercept the small man. A blue-white flash of light caught the chaos seed's eyes and he realized what had happened. Whoever this was, he had stolen the psi crystal from Caulder! Then another thought struck him, one that should have occurred to him first and was much more concerning. How the hell was this guy able to see in the mists?

Alarm racing through him, Richter reached out a hand and shouted, "Hey!"

Barely slowing, the man drew a slingshot from his belt and fired. Richter tried to move, but only twenty feet separated them. A small hard object hit Richter directly between the eyes.

“Ah... Arghhhh!” Richter cried out. One leg buckled from the pain and he collapsed unceremoniously onto his ass. The fact that he landed on a relatively sharp rock that bruised his tailbone didn’t help. The still-fading pain of the mana headache was magnified twenty-fold by the attack, and yet he lost only a few points of health. Richter had never been struck in the face by a gummy bear traveling at the speed of sound, but he imagined that *this* must be what it felt like. “Owwwww!” he groaned, holding his head in both hands.

What followed over the next minute was a massive amount of shouting and yelling. “Get him! How did he... Do not even try to shoot me with... Gah! He shot me with it... I have him... Fuck, I lost him!”

Richter shouted once, “I want him alive,” and then ignored everything else happening around him. He had faith that his men would catch the thief. He had a migraine as big as a giant’s menstrual cramps though. It made it impossible to focus enough to cast a healing spell for himself, let alone do anything to help his men.

A self-deprecating part of him felt like the pain was the Universe reminding him of a few things. One, that only a dumbass lets himself get shot in the face. Two, that if he was ever dumb enough to let it happen again, he wouldn’t have any feelings left to worry about... on account of the death and all. Finally, it told him to be humble. Despite his vaunted power and

high level, he could still be brought low in an instant. The part of him that realized all this was quite small though and was shrinking with every second that his head throbbed. The larger part of himself was not troubled by such existential concerns. It just had one thought that played on a loop while he sat there suffering. What the fuck had that guy shot him with?

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Richter's mind cleared a minute later. He saw that his attacker was held securely in Caulder's grasp. His Life mage cast *Weak Slow Heal* on him. The pain in his head and tailbone had barely abated, but at least the spell had removed the rising lump on his face.

The village soldiers were all still shouting, no doubt notifying every monster within a league of their location. He was about to put a stop to it, when Caulder spoke up, doing it for him, "Stop all that caterwauling! If you feel the need to shout and cry, I can give you something to truly shout about! Secure the perimeter!"

The guards sent many an ugly glance at the small man the sergeant had a death grip on. More than a few sported rising knots on their foreheads, and one limped from a bruised knee. They obeyed, however. Soon, only the captive, biomancers, archers and Caulder remained by their lord. One of the archers helped Richter to his feet. His gaze fell upon the bound figure

struggling in the sergeant's grip. Caulder rolled his eyes and slammed a fist down on top of the man's head. "Be still, kindir," he snapped.

The prisoner let out an *oof* and ceased his movement. He cast an aggrieved look up at Caulder as if he could not imagine what he had done to earn such harsh treatment.

Richter looked at Caulder, raising one eyebrow, to echo the small man's question. Was it really necessary to slap the guy around? The sergeant just shrugged and looked completely at peace with his actions. Rolling his eyes slightly, the chaos seed used *Analyze*.

Name: Shinecatcher	Race: Kindir	Disposition: Friendly
Level: 27		Profession: Bard
<u>STATS</u>		
Health: 210	Mana: 140	Stamina: 220
<u>ATTRIBUTES</u>		
Strength: 13	Agility: 35	Dexterity: 45
Constitution: 21	Endurance: 22	Intelligence: 14
Wisdom: 13	Charisma: 18	Luck: 17
<u>SKILLS</u>		
Slings: 17	Small Blades: 14	Tracking: 22
Pickpocket: 24	Stealth: 22	Pierce the Veil: 25
Traps: 12 <i>Trap Disarm:</i> 10	Disguise: 32 <i>Blend:</i> 32	Gambling: 17
		Sleight of Hand: 32
Lumberjacking: 4	Singing: 27	Dancing: 8
Stringed Instruments:	Woodwinds: 51	Percussion: 17

48		
Herb Lore: 5	Cooking: 20	Fishing: 3
<u>DESCRIPTION</u>		
Kindir are an offshoot of the gnome race. These happy creatures roam here and there and are known for their curious nature. They are so curious in fact that they are immune to fear. Kindir consider themselves to be the most honorable and courteous of beings. So honorable in fact that they “honor” others by “appreciating” their valuables as much as possible, and so courteous that they have no problem inviting anyone into their homes, or themselves into anyone else’s homes. To the kindir, that is only fair, and they would never disrespect another by not assuming they felt the same. This type of logic has led many other sapient species to kill kindir on sight. Kindir get three points to distribute per level, and each level gives +1 to Agility and +1 to Dexterity.		

A kindir, Richter thought to himself abstractly. He felt like he’d heard that before, but he couldn’t place it. He decided to put it aside before it worried him like a burr in his foot. The Land had been created to embody every magic, culture and race in existence, it only made sense that some things would be familiar. What was more interesting was that the man had the widest collection of skills he’d seen on anyone other than himself. This Shinecatcher was also the first Bard he’d ever met.

There was both anger and distaste in his voice when Caulder spoke, “We caught the thief, my lord.”

“I’m not a thief,” the bound man protested. “I was merely strolling through the woods when I saw this shining thing. I picked it up and before I

knew it, these men came out of nowhere and tried to steal it from *me*.

Naturally, I tried to run and-”

“You’re a liar and thief just like all of your people!” Caulder jeered, interrupting his captive. The sergeant started shaking him for good measure. The bard’s small body shook like a flag in the wind.

“Not true! My name is Shine and I’m wonderful!” Shinecatcher protested in an aggrieved voice, even as he flopped about. He really did sound like he was the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice. “What you said is not true at all! You’re a liar... your liar breath feels like fire!”

“Let me kill him, my lord!” Caulder shouted-slash-begged.

“Breathe, man,” Richter responded calmly. “I’m not a huge fan of this guy either. I can’t tell you how irritating it was to be shot by whatever the hell that was-”

“An acorn,” the kindir interjected helpfully. His voice was bright and happy as if the large man holding him wasn’t discussing his imminent death. Then again, Richter thought, maybe the kindir was just used to people threatening his life. That was entirely possible.

“An acorn,” Richter repeated incredulously. “It was just an acorn?”

“Yes,” the kindir answered smiling. There was no malice in his expression, just an easy happiness, “Can I have it back?”

“What?” Richter asked in disbelief. Who the hell would ask for something like that back? Then a much more worrying thought occurred to him. He’d just taken a nut to the face, grown weak in the knees, and now his ass hurt. The metaphysical implications were not making him happy. For just a moment, he considered ending the creepy little One Direction reject’s life. If he was being honest, it was more like five whole moments, but in the end, he decided not to kill the little man. Something which, in Richter’s opinion, was a moral triumph.

The chaos seed calmed himself before addressing Caulder again, “Okay, he shot me with an acorn, but no lasting harm was done. Did you retrieve my psi crystal?”

“Here you are, my lord.” The sergeant handed the glowing jewel over.

Shinecatcher reached out to intercept it, “That is my crystal!” He quieted when Caulder cuffed him again. The kinder’s voice was high-pitched like a child’s, furthering the overall impression that the man was just a teenager. Richter didn’t let himself forget what he had just seen though. Shinecatcher was a Professed Bard. Contrary to popular belief, Bards weren’t just happy little guys in tights that strummed lutes all day. They were normally “catch-all” classes that had no issue employing Rogue tactics and skills. Shinecatcher’s status sheet proved that. He was level twenty-four

in pickpocketing. Hell, the guy's name proved that Richter should keep an eye on him. There was also the fact that the kindir had downed him in one shot and it had taken almost twenty guards to subdue him. Richter wouldn't make the mistake of underestimating the thief.

Richter put the crystal in his bag out of the reach of the light-fingered kindir and addressed him again, "I have several questions, but the most important is, how can you see in the mists?"

"Mists? What mists?" Shinecatcher asked, his eyes wide and innocent.

"Do you see, my lord," Caulder spat. "His people are all liars and thieves. You should just let me-" The sergeant paused, his hand patting his waist. "Where is my dagger?"

Shinecatcher began looking around as if he was trying to help find it, all the while sawing through his bonds with the very item that Caulder was missing.

"Gaaahh!" Caulder shouted. He snatched the blade back and pounded his gauntleted fist on the kindir's head. Shinecatcher dropped to the ground, dazed.

"Sergeant!" Richter sharply admonished the man. "We need him alive and coherent to get answers. Control yourself!"

“I apologize, my lord.” His tone was recalcitrant, but he still glared bloody murder at the addled kindir. “You must understand that in some countries, kindir are killed on sight.”

“Be that as it may,” Richter said, “try to be cool.”

Caulder nodded in acquiescence, but didn’t let down his guard. At least when he helped the small fellow back to his feet, he wasn’t overly rough, Richter thought.

A few minutes later, Shinecatcher had recovered enough to speak again. Richter repeated his earlier question.

“Oh, *these* mists,” the kindir said, looking around. “I use my eyes to see through them.”

Heading off Caulder’s inevitable retaliation, Richter spoke up. “Look, I don’t have time for this. My people are in trouble. You tried to steal my gem, but I’m willing to just let that go. What I absolutely have to know however, is how you are immune to the magic of the mists.” He looked earnestly at Shinecatcher. “I am the lord of these lands and if there is a problem with the enchantment protecting my village, I have to know. I don’t want to hurt you, but I will. Believe me when I tell you that I will do whatever I must to safeguard my people.”

A look of consideration crossed Shinecatcher’s face. Then he spoke

in a bargaining tone, “If I tell you, will you give me back my gem?”

“It is not yours, you little bastard,” Caulder said through gritted teeth. This time he turned the kindir around to face him and put his hands on both of the gnome’s arms so he could get some serious shaking done. Before he really got into it though, Richter spoke up again.

“Dude! You have got to chill out!” Caulder looked up like he’d forgotten Richter was there, but he nodded and turned his captive back around. He looked a bit sheepish when his liege said, “Woosaa, bra! Woosaaaa.” The sergeant had no idea what his lord was talking about, but he was used to Richter’s strange references by now and got the general tone. Caulder took a deep breath and calmed himself.

One of the archers chuckled slightly, but cut off when Richter looked at him sharply and said, “Not helping.”

The guard looked down and said, “Sorry, my lord.”

Richter just shook his head, “Read the room, guy.” With a heavy sigh, the chaos seed looked at Shinecatcher again. “You cannot have the gem, but if you tell me what I need to know, I’ll give you this.” He reached into his Bag of Holding and pulled out a high steel dagger enchanted with *Life Damage*.

The kindir’s eyes lit up, “Ooooooh. Is it enchanted? It is enchanted!

What is it enchanted with? Wait, let me guess. Is it a dagger that causes boils? Does it cook meat while you cut with it? Can it make you stop farting? Can it make you start? My uncle makes a stew that does that.” His grin widened and he drew in an excited breath, “I could call it the stew dagger!”

Richter looked at the little man in amazement. That entire speech had only taken about five seconds. He had no idea how the kindir’s little chest had been able to hold enough air to say all that in one breath. Holding up a hand quickly to stop any further guesses, he said, “It’s a High Steel Dagger of Life Damage. It will be very effective against Death creatures.”

“Ooooooooooh,” Shinecatcher said, even longer this time. The kindir reached for the dagger, but Richter kept it out of reach. His head still throbbed. If that really had been what the Bard could do with just an acorn, he wasn’t eager to arm the kindir with a blade.

Shinecatcher looked at the blade for another few seconds, until a considering look came into his eyes, “Are you good at killing undead?”

“We do not have time for this, my lord,” Caulder protested.

Richter raised a hand to quiet him. The sergeant wasn’t wrong, but his trade skill had just activated. He could “smell” that there was a deal to be made. “We kill undead,” Richter answered cautiously.

“I live that way,” Shinecatcher said, pointing south. “There is a cave full of undead that has appeared near my people. If you agree to destroy the boners and groaners, I’m sure the kindir elders will tell you how we can see in the grey. They might even share the recipe. Oh, and I get to keep the dagger. Will you help? I know my people would really appreciate it!”

Unbidden, a prompt appeared in Richter’s vision.

You have been offered a Quest: **Helping Hand I**

You have encountered a new race. The kindir are somehow immune to your settlement spell, Confusing Mists. Shinecatcher says that he will tell you the secret of their immunity if you destroy a nest of undead near his home. Though it is unclear what type of Death creatures these are, you assume ‘boners’ might mean skeletons. On the other hand, you could be completely wrong. What does seem clear, from what the kindir let slip about a “recipe,” is that the secret may have something to do with a potion.

Success Conditions: Destroy the nest of undead

Rewards:

Introduction to the kindir elders to learn the secret of their immunity to the mists.

Increased Relationship with his people.

Penalty for failure or refusal of Quest: Unknown

Do you accept? Yes or No

To accept this quest, you must give the Life Damage dagger to Shinecatcher.

Richter read through the quest. Before he made a decision though, he needed to know something, “How far away do your people live?”

“Oh, not far,” Shinecatcher said, shrugging.

Richter sighed. He needed a better answer. The problem was that his domain extended south for another seven or eight miles. He pulled his map out. “Can you show me?” He mentally positioned the map so that it only showed the southern half of his domain. After a minute of studying it, Shinecatcher pointed with his finger at a spot only three miles south.

Map Updated! Kinder settlement added.

A new icon appeared on the map. It looked like a tiny hut and was well within Richter’s domain. “How long have you all been there?” he asked. Was there really a whole settlement of people that he just had no idea about? With a ten-mile radius, his domain was over three hundred square miles of untouched wilderness, so it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility,

but it did make Richter uneasy. Even if the kindir weren't a threat, it didn't mean that other settlements wouldn't be. Exploration was still something that needed to be stressed.

Shinecatcher shrugged again, unaware of the chaos seed's concerns, "We come and go, but usually come back at least once a year."

Richter shook his head. The man was a veritable font of information. The quest prompt was still hanging in his vision. One thing was sure; he needed to know how the kindir could see in the mists. He really didn't want to torture the guy to find out, and it was clear the kindir wasn't about to just tell him. There wasn't really a choice; he had to accept the quest.

Before he did that though, he'd see if he could add in his own proviso, "I will accept your offer if you promise to tell your people first, then come to my village and guide us there in three days." This guy was definitely a little squirrely. If that was indicative of his people, then it was entirely possible that they might start shooting Richter's war party full of something a lot worse than acorns when they got close.

Shinecatcher seemed to ponder the idea for a moment before saying, "Well, I was planning on heading into Law to sell this new crystal I found."

Caulder started shaking the man. Really shaking him! The kindir was doing a bobble head impression for a good three or four seconds before

Richter held out his hand to stop the sergeant. It had the desired effect though.

After blinking several times, Shinecatcher looked back at Richter, “After much consideration, however, I agree to your terms.”

“Say it two more times,” Richter said. “Or,” he added sharply, before Shinecatcher could protest, “I will let Sergeant Caulder try and get the information out of you now. This quest will help both of us, but I need to be absolutely sure that you will return. I *will* have your vow.” His tone was as hard as steel.

For the first time, the innocence fled Shinecatcher’s face and his expression turned grave. He looked from Richter’s deadly serious face to Caulder’s smiling expression, which was no less dangerous. He knew he was out of options. “I will appear at your village in three days’ time and guide you to my settlement. I swear it. I swear it. I swear it.”

“Thrice heard and witnessed,” Richter intoned. All of his men repeated the ritual words.

*Shinecatcher has made you a **Vow**. Failure to fulfill the terms when asked will cause a decrease in his reputation with all beings, and other unknown consequences. Keep in mind, your word means everything!*

The quest prompt changed in Richter’s vision to include this new

proviso. He selected “Yes.”

“We don’t have any more time to waste,” the chaos seed said. He still didn’t like the idea of releasing Shinecatcher, but the truth was Richter had mostly been bluffing. He and his men still needed to see the army safely back to the village, and this whole affair had lost them thirty minutes. Now that he had the kindir’s vow and the quest, he felt much better about letting him go. “Cut him loose.”

Caulder looked like he’d been asked to chew glass, but he did as he was told. Richter kept his part of the bargain and handed over the Life dagger.

“It was great meeting all of you,” Shinecatcher said brightly. His previous serious expression disappeared like words on the wind. Now that he was free, he wasted no time and started walking away. Before he disappeared into the forest, he stopped and waved both hands at the warband, “Thanks for the daggers, and I’ll see you soon!” There was a blade in both of his hands.

“Daggers?” Caulder repeated questioningly. Then his hand shot to his belt, finding only an empty sheath. “That dirty bastard!” He took a step towards the kindir, but the man had already disappeared into the forest. A mocking song rose into the air from the direction he’d gone, quickly fading

away.

Shaking his head at the inanity of life, Richter told Caulder to just let it go. The biomancers had healed the few small injuries the guards had sported, and everyone was almost at a hundred percent. A minute later they were moving again, but the sergeant didn't stop cursing for at least a mile.

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Thankfully, nothing else leaped out of the woods to attack them. Both Richter and Caulder were in strung-out shape. The chaos seed could feel his reaction time diminishing, and a *Tired* debuff appeared on his interface. Even the guards that hadn't been part of the goblin raid were flagging after an eight-mile hump over unbroken wilderness. It was with profound relief that Richter finally heard Alma's voice in his mind. At their current *Psi Bond* rank, their maximum communication rank was fifteen hundred yards, almost a mile, but at least he knew an end was in sight.

Richter had been getting concerned as they got closer to the edge of his domain. The question "Where are they?" had kept shooting through his mind, along with other, darker musings. He had reminded himself that the army was slowed down with wounded, but he couldn't help worrying and thinking that they should have come across them by now. The dragonling's voice was a balm soothing his troubled mind. As soon as she was in range,

Alma sent visual information. His map updated and he knew the returning army's exact position. Richter adjusted his warband's course to angle north slightly and told his men they would be reunited with the army soon.

Master, are you alright? Alma's tone was thick with concern.

Richter's response was tired, but reassuring. **I'm fine, love. Is the army okay?**

Some of the prisoners are hurt badly from their captivity. No one has died though.

Were there any attacks since the army left the valley?

No, master.

At her response, Richter breathed a sigh of relief, but it begged another question. **Then why aren't you closer?**

Her answer made him curse loudly. Sion and Caulder looked at him, but he just firmed his lips and shook his head. The warband picked up the pace while he berated himself. The reason the army wasn't closer was because he was a damn moron! He had forgotten to give the freed captives immunity to the mists!

Even after seeing how distressed the prisoners that had been transported with him had been, Richter hadn't put two and two together. Honestly, he'd been completely distracted by the emergence of the Dungeon.

His error was inexcusable. Richter just started thinking about these abused and battered people having to stumble through the enchantment. They wouldn't have been able to see more than five feet in front of their faces!

Even worse, the magic of the mists would intentionally lead them off course. The only way they could have made it through was if each prisoner was paired with a soldier that had immunity to the village's defensive magic. That of course meant that it would be nigh impossible for his fighting men and women to form a cohesive defense against any possible monster attacks. Richter's grimace deepened. The prisoners must be scared shitless. The fact that they had even made it two miles through the mists over rough terrain was actually impressive.

I'm on my way, love, he promised her. **I will give them all immunity as soon as I get there.**

Oh. There is no need, master. I gave all of the prisoners immunity.

Richter blinked in surprise. **You can do that?**

She thought back smugly, **I can do many things, master. Our bond has deepened.**

Richter exhaled in relief. Alma explained that while it had taken a significant amount of time to give everyone immunity, it was the prisoners' overall poor health after captivity that had slowed their pace. The chaos seed

thought about just how lucky he was to have such great support. Rather than slow down, he told the warband that their goal was only a mile away, and that they should pick up the pace. There were a few groans, but everyone did as he commanded. The one or two that lagged quickly caught up when Caulder started barking at them.

It took another ten minutes, but soon he was standing in front of both Damien, Yoshi's lieutenant, and Terrod. Now reunited, the warband and the returning armies took the opportunity to rest and heal. The biomancers Richter had brought with him spread out among the freed prisoners. They cast *Weak Cure Disease* and *Weak Slow Heal* on the recent captives. Some Life magi were already with the returning army, but they had been pulling double duty as guardsmen so hadn't been able to do more than heal the worst cases.

Richter looked at his casters with pride. Even though it had only been a few months, the tutelage the biomancers received under Sumiko had made them legitimate magicians. They cast spells much more efficiently than they had before. Some had even reached *initiate* rank in Life magic and so enjoyed a bonus to their spell power.

While they were waiting, Terrod filled him in. The troll mercenaries had left as they'd agreed. Once they exited the valley, the mercs had turned east towards the Azergoth Swamp. Richter was relieved to hear that there

had been no treachery. The trolls were apparently true to their profession: willing to kill someone for money and just as happy to walk away if that was where the profit lay. Seeing as how the alternative was being set on fire by Richter, they'd made the right fiscal move.

The sprite and village armies had moved west towards the forest as quickly as possible. Before journeying back into the valley, Hisako had cast a mass heal spell on the prisoners which had greatly improved their mobility. Unfortunately, it had not been enough to fix all of their ills, but it had still gotten them moving. The prisoners with the worst injuries had had to be carried by soldiers. That was another reason they hadn't made good time.

The soldiers also reported that some of the prisoners had struck out on their own. Approximately two dozen had left. Most of the former captives were in no condition, emotionally or physically, to brave the wilderness, but a few had families or other commitments that could not wait. The fact that some of the prisoners had left wasn't unexpected. Richter had left instructions that they could leave if they so desired. They had been in captivity long enough.

Once they had reached the mists, it had taken even more time to convince the prisoners to enter. At that point, another ten had decided to leave, but then they ran out of time. Goblins had been sighted to the east. Faced with the unknown of the mists or the known hell of being captured

again, all of the remaining prisoners had decided to enter the mists. Alma had then started giving the prisoners immunity, but it was slow going. After the dragonling was done though, their speed had picked up. She had also periodically summoned mist workers to help share the load. Damien had left some sprites at the edge of the mists as a rearguard, but thankfully, no goblins entered Richter's domain to follow.

The fighters and magi had traveled on the edges of the column with the prisoners on the inside. They were accompanied there by the soldiers carrying the wounded... and the dead. Richter's heart fell to see how many the battle had claimed. Hisako's Master spell had resurrected a great many who had died due to one of the Druid's curses. It had only worked on the freshly dead though. Hundreds of sprites and villagers would never live to see another sunrise. Richter's lip quivered with suppressed emotion and his fist clenched. He pushed his emotions down. It was not yet time to grieve. That would come soon.

Richter took a moment to welcome the prisoners to his realm. He promised them food, water and shelter, but also made it clear that they must travel as quickly as possible. Though they were weary and heartsore, they still rose to their feet. Soon everyone was moving. The chaos seed patted his familiar where she rested on his shoulders and sent her aloft again. Leading the way once more, they set off for home.

It took another eight hours, but they made it safely back to the village. A few beasts and monsters challenged them, but the sprite archers made quick work of them. Richter and Alma summoned mist workers as quickly as they could, and before long, hundreds of the tireless grey constructs were traveling with them. They carried the wounded, the dead, and also the spoils of war that the armies had brought along with them.

Everyone, including Richter himself, was worn through by the time the village walls came into sight. A debuff, *Moderate Fatigue*, had appeared in the corner of his vision and his Concentration, Endurance and Stamina regen had taken a severe hit. He had placed his Belt of Sustenance back on, but the damage was already done. He needed a rest. Thankfully, Randolphus had worked wonders again.

By the time they were all back inside the village walls, a tent city had been set up in orderly lines. Rows of crude tents, often no more than four poles keeping a tarp in the air, were laid out in the empty southeast corner of the village. A feast area had been laid out in the middle and over a dozen large campfires were burning brightly.

The chamberlain had also had a large grave dug outside the village walls. The size of it once more threatened to overwhelm Richter's emotional control, but Alma flew down and comforted her master. Being in contact with the dragonling always helped his mood. She sent him calming thoughts

and Richter felt his heart ease. It helped a great deal that Randolphus took control of the refugees.

The chamberlain had Futen next to him and greeted each former prisoner as they entered the village walls. The remnant removed their immunity to the mists as they passed. This caused some fear and consternation among the released captives, but Randolphus was there to soothe them. Between his reasonable countenance and the promise of hot food, healing and shelter, none of the refugees complained overly much as they were guided to the tent city.

Randolphus also arranged for the dead and wounded to be seen to. The mist workers carrying the fallen were directed to the large grave. Family members of the guards rushed outside the village walls. Soon, wails of desolate pain rose into the air, mixed with cries of relief depending on the fate of their loved ones. After a few moments, those whose husbands, wives or children had survived turned to those who had lost someone and helped them care for their dead.

Richter had started to walk woodenly towards the grave when Randolphus grasped his arm, "My lord," the chamberlain said softly. "You have done enough. You must rest."

The chaos seed shook his head. His eyes were locked on one woman

draped over the body of her dead husband. The two mist workers carrying his litter stood there, motionless and unaffected by her sorrow. She clutched at his armor, weeping, and paid no attention to either the large gash in his skull nor the gore that smeared his body. Richter started to pull his arm away, saying, "I need to help them." His voice sounded hollow, even to him. "I have to--"

"You have to be our leader," Randolphus said firmly, but with deep understanding. "We will hold the burial ceremony tonight. That leaves you several hours to rest." Richter started to argue again, but the chamberlain didn't give him a chance, "Your people will need you to make them feel safe tonight. Remember that you are not alone, my lord. Trust me to tend to what needs to be addressed. You do not have to do this alone."

Randolphus's words touched a chord in Richter. He had made the mistake before of trying to do everything himself. People had died as a result. His chamberlain was right. Tiredly, Richter nodded his head. Before he left though, he let Randolphus know about the kindir they had met and his seeming immunity to the mists.

The chamberlain's eyes narrowed at that, but after he heard about the quest and the man's Vow to return, he just shrugged, as it was beyond his control. By this point, Richter was almost asleep on his feet. At Randy's gesture, two of the village women came forward to attend him. He tried to

tell them that he could make his own way, but they just ushered him along.

Soon he was walking across the Great Seal and entering his room. To his great surprise, a large wooden tub sat in the center of the room.

Randolphus had thought of everything. The two women helped him remove his armor and clothes. In the past he might have protested being treated like a noble, but between his exhaustion and the months he had spent as a ruler, all Richter felt was silent appreciation for the two women. Soon he was eased into the tub. They started scrubbing his body with soft cloths, cleaning away the blood and grime of the past day.

Richter fell into a peaceful lassitude despite himself, enjoying the massaging fingers of the two village women. He dozed a time or two, until they pulled him from the tub and dried him off. He fell into bed and Alma lay atop his chest. The dragonling curled into a ball and closed her own eyes, completely at peace. He was in a deep slumber before the women left his room, taking his dirty clothes and armor with them.

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Richer woke with a shout. At the same time, Alma reared up from where she had been resting on his chest. Her wings spread wide as she issued a threatening hiss. Their psychic link recycled anger and fear between them until neither was sure who had started the process. One hand was held out, ready to summon deadly magic while the other patted around his naked body, searching for a weapon. Long seconds passed until he realized that he was no longer in battle. His heart began to calm and his familiar relaxed as he did. One of them had had a nightmare, and neither was sure which of them it had been. Neither cared about that detail though. They were united.

A guard poked his head through the doorway, hand on the hilt of his sword. Seeing Richter's concerned face, he scanned the room for danger. When his lord waved him away though, he relaxed his grip on his weapon.

"What time is it?" Richter asked. "How long have I slept?"

"Three hours have passed, my lord. The chamberlain told me to wake

you in five hours for the ceremony.”

Richter nodded. He looked around the room. He began to ask where his weapons and armor were, then the last vestiges of sleep cleared. They were soul bound to him. He always knew where they were. A quick check of his map showed that his gear was in the forge. A pile of simple beige clothes lay on a stool nearby. His Bag of Holding lay on the table.

With a groan, Richter sank back into the bed. The pains of the day before made themselves known in every ache of his muscles. Healing magic restored health points and mended wounds, but injuries still took a toll on his body. He knew there was magic that could ease sore muscles as well, but he didn't know it yet. Also, Sumiko loved to harp on about how natural healing was the best healing and that pain was a blessed reminder of when you had done too much... blah blah blah. Richter normally tuned out when she started waxing poetic. He shook his head and, with a faint mewling sound, sat up again.

“Go get Randolphus for me, please,” Richter told the guard. The man clapped a hand to his heart and left. Alma looked at him for a moment, and then, in a very puppy-like way, walked in a circle before lying back down on the bed. He fondly stroked her scales for a moment before getting up.

The chaos seed quickly donned his clothes and started stretching.

After a few minutes the worst of his stiffness had gone away, though the aches remained. He sat back down on the bed and addressed the final prompts waiting for him. These were the ones he had saved until he had a clear and rested mind. The first had appeared as soon as the last villager was safely through the walls.

Congratulations! You have completed a Quest: **Bloodstone I**

You were charged with saving the lives of the goblins' slaves. You succeeded and surpassed what was required. Not only did you free every slave, but you brought 100% of them back to safety. Your heroic efforts will be rewarded!

Rewards increased per % of prisoners saved. All Rewards increased by 100%!

Total XP awarded: **6,250** (base 5,000 x 1.25) Experience Points

+10,000 Relationship Points with each freed prisoner.

+100% more likely to stay in the village if asked

+100% more likely to swear fealty if they stay in the village

Richter smiled. His village was about to grow! The next prompt dealt with his new alignment and, in a way, his very nature.

*Know This! By revealing a **Truth** to others, you have learned more about yourself! No longer are you or other chaos seeds bound to an alignment of “0.” Your new alignment is **Chaotic (2) Neutral**. Know thyself to find thy power!*

Before releasing the power of the chaotic shard, everyone in The Land had been assigned a number to define their alignment. Positive numbers had generally been *Good*, negative *Evil*, and a zero, which was what he had been, denoted *Neutral*. The Chaos energy from the shard had changed that. Now, one’s nature was no longer confined to just one dimension. In addition to being *Good* or *Evil*, people also were now known as *Chaotic* or *Orderly*. This was the new “truth” that he had revealed to the entire Land.

What this new “truth” portended, Richter had almost no idea. Personally though, it had changed him from an alignment of “0” to “Chaotic (2) Neutral.” The consequences for him were so small in the grand scheme as to be laughable, however. The true effect of touching the Chaos Shard was that it had ended an Age. After thousands of years, the Epoch of Banished Gods had passed. The Age of Chaos had begun.

Again, the full consequences of that were beyond him, but in addition to having a new alignment, he had also absorbed the power of the Chaos Shard. Some of the energy had escaped, but he had still absorbed enough to earn himself the following prompts.

*Congratulations! You have absorbed the power of a Chaos Shard! You are the first to have done this and have earned a **Choice**! Never forget, Choice is the essence of Chaos.*

*You are now faced with a **Choice**! As the first Chaos Seed to find a Chaos Shard you may choose one of the following:*

- 1) Double your current total of Chaos Points. Total Chaos Points: **122**.*
- 2) Gain the ability: **Feel of Chaos**. This may lead you to more sources of Chaos in the future.*
- 3) Three extra respawns*

You have seven seconds to decide, starting now. 7...

A counter started counting down as soon as Richter finished reading.

“What the fuck?” Richter said, his heart beating wildly. Seven seconds. Who the fuck gave someone seven seconds to decide something like this?

6, 5, ...

In the time it took Richter to process his first reaction to the prompt, two seconds had passed. When he realized that, he expressed himself again, admittedly in a more time efficient way, “Fuck!”

4, ...

One more second down. His heart really started hammering and his thoughts went into overdrive as he calculated his options. More points were always good. He had no idea what to do with them, but it seemed like a good bet. A mystery ability that could lead him to more chaos shards or “other sources of chaos” was promising as well. Abilities, unlike skills, seemed to almost always give unique bonuses. Who knew if he would ever get the opportunity to gain the ability again? It was the last choice that really made him hesitate though. Extra respawns.

What did it mean? He had often wondered if he was truly immortal. Now, it looked like he had gotten his answer. Richter lost another second reeling from that. He had been throwing himself into dangerous situations again and again. He’d known academically that he might not come back if he died, but knowing it and *knowing* it were two different things. It meant that one day he would die and never come back.

Should he choose the extra lives? How many did he have left? What should he do? Richter wanted to scream but it would take too much time.

1, ...

The counter ticked down to one second. Even confronted with truth of his mortality, Richter wasn’t one to shy from hard choices. He made his choice.

*Congratulations! You have chosen to receive the Ability: **Feel of Chaos**.*

*You now have the ability to detect other nearby sources of Chaos. With your alignment of **Chaotic (2) Neutral**, you have reached the second rank of this ability.*

Rank 1: You may become aware of sources of Chaos within one hundred yards.

Rank 2: You may become aware of sources of Chaos within two hundred yards. You can also perceive a vague sense of where the Chaos lies in relation to yourself.

*For making a Choice in the allotted time you are awarded: **2 Chaos points**.*

*Total Chaos Points: **124**.*

Richter blinked. He didn't have any complaints about the ability. It was what he had been hoping for. The detection capability seemed pretty nonspecific, but it was still way better than nothing. His choice has also given him some insight into his new alignment. The number qualifier "2" wasn't just for show, it had real world implications. Already, his new ability had twice the range than it would have had otherwise.

The decision now made, Richter took a moment and just tried to explore with his new ability. For long moments, he sat on the bed with his eyes closed. Searching. He didn't feel a thing. Richter opened his eyes

again. Either he didn't know how to identify the "Feel of Chaos" or there weren't any sources of Chaos within his range.

He also realized it was possible that there were other factors at play. He had learned the hard way that his prompts only described ideal scenarios. The damage described by a poison, for example, might be less effective on certain races. Even his magic might be unreliable in certain scenarios. For all he knew, being physically close to the Great Seal, the physical manifestation of his Place of Power, made it harder to detect other types of magic.

The chaos seed went back to examining the prompts.

*As the **Catalyst** for the **Age of Chaos**, you are Blessed by the **Lords of Chaos**. Your Catalyst Blessing awards you the following boons:*

- 1) +100% earned Chaos Points from any source*
- 2) One free purchase from the Sea of Chaos. You may use this at any time.*
- 3) +1 to the accessible stratum of the Sea of Chaos*

Richter considered what he had just read. It definitely explained some things. First, that he only should have gotten four chaos points for each level he reached. That made more sense. It suggested that the base number of Chaos Points he earned each level were due to his alignment. Of course,

for everything he learned, there were still fifty thousand things he didn't even know to ask questions about yet. What was a stratum? Who the hell were the Lords of Chaos? And what was a Catalyst? He was smart enough to have picked up the importance of that. As his gramps used to say, his head was more than just a hat rack.

He also wondered if the Chaos Points he'd been awarded were because he had only had one second left to make his Choice. If that was true, deciding faster might prove beneficial in the future.

From day one there were things he didn't know, but always before, there was the hope that he could find the right person or the right book to explain things. He was no stranger to being in the dark, but this time it was even worse. The entire world, and everyone in it, was uncharted territory now. In regards to his Chaotic nature, Richter had a feeling that he would have to figure it out himself. The "Sea of Chaos" at least, was an easily answered mystery.

*Know This! As a Chaos Seed, you may access the **Sea of Chaos**. The benefits of this will be different every time the Sea is accessed. Your nature allows you to access the first two stratum of the Sea. Due to the Blessing of the Lords of Chaos, you may access one stratum deeper than your nature allows. Each level has more powerful offerings but they are more expensive as well. Would you like to access the Sea of Chaos? Yes or No?*

Richter quickly chose “Yes,” eager to see what his Chaos points could do.

*You have accessed the **Sea of Chaos**. The Sea contains everything that was, is, or could be. Choose wisely, for you may choose the Catalyst for your own death and salvation.*

*You may reach the first stratum at a cost of **1 Chaos Point**.*

*You may reach the second stratum at a cost of **3 Chaos Points**.*

*You may reach the third stratum at a cost of **5 Chaos Points**.*

Which level do you wish to access?

Lips pursed in thought, he chose level one, and more prompts appeared.

*Total Chaos Points: **123***

These are the current offerings of the first Stratum of the Sea of Chaos:

1 st STRATUM OFFEREINGS		
Offering	Chaotic Cost	Traits
Scroll of Summon Weak Chaotic Spirit	2 points	Summons a level 20 Chaotic Evil Spirit for one hour. Immune to physical harm. 17% chance the spirit will attack you.

		This is decreased by 5% for every point of evil alignment or chaotic alignment you possess.
Scroll of Chaotic Melding	3 points	Allows the user to adopt one random trait from another nearby creature for 24 hours.
Chaotic Dagger	5 points	Provides a dagger of +15 damage. Once unsheathed, it will disappear in 24 hours. If claiming the life of a Chaos seed, it will not only end their current life, but also an additional one of their respawns. Their rebirth time will be based on their new respawn count.

Know This! No purchase is required. This window may be dismissed at any time, but it will last no longer than 7 minutes, sometimes less. The purchase price of accessing this level cannot be retrieved. Each time a stratum of the Sea of Chaos is accessed, the offerings are randomized and may never come again.

Richter read over the prompt twice, excited about the possibilities. It was the last option that drew his gaze immediately. Every new magic and bit

of Lore he had picked up since waking in The Land had been mentally applied towards a problem that was always at the back of his mind. What would he do if he met a hostile chaos seed? What could he do to remove a threat that could be continually reborn? He finally had an answer.

It still wasn't clear how many respawns a chaos seed had, or even if it was uniform for every chaos seed. One thing that was clear to Richter now though, was that there were a finite number. The earlier offer to give him more lives had hinted at that, but seeing a weapon purposely made to kill a creature like himself really drove it home.

Richter was going to die one day.

His gaze unfocused and he actually forgot about the prompt for a moment. A strange feeling was welling up inside of him, and it seemed important enough to give it his full attention. It took about a minute to understand what he was experiencing. Though it had never been explicitly stated, he had thought he was immortal. Dying definitely sucked balls, there was no doubt about it, but still, he had taken risks with abandon. That fearlessness had stemmed in part from the belief that he'd always get another chance. That he could "Reset" and keep playing.

Now he knew differently. Now he knew that at some point, he had an expiration date. The knowledge made Richter feel something, but he

couldn't pin it down at first. Fear flashed through him. That wasn't a new sensation and wasn't one he denied or ran from. Only morons lacked fear. At this point, it was an old friend and counselor that would never inhibit him, only guide him when needed. After that, he felt worry and panic, but those emotions swiftly flew beyond the boundaries of his consciousness like shooting stars. They were bright and poignant, but they faded quickly against the immensity of his primary emotion. What was left, was... exhilaration. He started grinning, as he received a gift that he hadn't known he needed. An unnoticed hole that had been slowly siphoning his will was now filled. He was complete once more. Life mattered. Time mattered. *He* mattered!

You have uncovered your fourth **Quality**!

You are **Impassioned**!

Though you have committed yourself to your new life in The Land, a small part of you quailed at the immensity of forever. Many would trade their very souls for an eternity on this plane, but it is only because they ignore or are ignorant of how being untouched by time means being untouched by life. Every sip of wine is slightly less rich; every breath slightly less vital; every embrace has just a touch less passion. The final consequence is inevitable: a heart that is as cold as stone. A small part of what you are railed against this curse, but this will not be your fate. You have rediscovered your mortality and with it, the core truth shared by all

creatures that live and die. Simply put, Life is amazing and should be cherished with every breath! All your future actions will reflect this newfound passion for life and others will react positively to it. **+5% to Movement and Attack Speed. +5% to Charisma.**

Had he just gotten sexier *and* more dangerous? With a shit-eating grin on his face, Richter answered himself. I think so! He just couldn't wait to "Crush his enemies" and all that other stuff!

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Richter made his choice.

Total Chaos Points Remaining: 121

A dinner plate-sized rent appeared in front of Richter. The hole in reality had ragged edges that wavered and fluctuated. As soon as it was opened, a voice like a distant hiss of steam echoed around the room. “Claim your possession, Chaos Seed.”

He looked at the swirling grey portal hovering in the air, hoping against hope that his purchase would just shoot out of it. Nothing happened. Reserving the right to be completely pissed if some chaos demon ate his hand, Richter reached inside. His hand disappeared into the small portal, but there was no pain. After a second, he felt parchment, and his hand closed around a scroll. As quickly as he could, he pulled his hand back out and the rip in reality disappeared.



You have found:	Durability: 13/13
Scroll of Summon	Item Class: Unusual
Weak Chaotic	Quality: Superb
Spirit	Weight: 0.2 kg
	Traits: Summons a level 20 Chaotic Evil Spirit for one hour. Immune to physical harm. 17% chance the spirit will attack you. This is decreased by 5% for every point of evil alignment or chaotic alignment you possess

The scroll was tied shut with a shimmering grey ribbon. The paper was a lighter grey, and as he stared at it the patterns on the paper shifted slightly. Richter looked at it in amazement. It was his first direct access to a Higher Energy spell. Reading the traits of the scroll, he realized that using it was not without peril. There was a chance that the spirit he summoned might turn on him. With his two points of Chaotic alignment though, that risk was less than 10%. He wouldn't use the item lightly, but it might not be a bad idea to have a high-level spirit in his back pocket.

After seeing the power of the first stratum, he didn't plan to stop. Richter accessed the Sea of Chaos again. It was a bit of a relief that the price

to reenter the various levels hadn't gone up. Pay to play was always a pain in the ass, but it would be so much worse if the price increased each time he accessed the Sea. Richter eyeballed the second level for a sec, but then decided to get the pudding. He'd already eaten the meat, after all.

Before he spent the five Chaos Points needed to get to the third stratum, he stopped a moment and reached for his Bag of Holding. Sticking his hand inside, he accessed his inventory. After locating the item he was looking for, a regretful sigh escaped his lips. Only five Potions of Selak's Luck remained. It was imperative that he get Tabia to make more soon. They had enough shiverleaf frond to create more of the silver solution, but it still took three to four days to make and had a relatively high fail rate. If she failed, it meant starting over. More time lost and the possible loss of valuable and finite resources.

Since the potion was worth more than its weight in gold though, Richter wasn't one to pinch pennies... Well, not often... Well, not *all* the time, and when he did, it was so that in moments like this he still had resources to expend. It appeared that using Chaos required a measure of Luck, which was probably why he'd been driven to invest in the stat ever since coming to The Land. He'd never quite understood the compulsion, despite having always enjoyed a good hand of Texas Hold'em. One more mystery solved, he took a finger-length vial out of his bag and downed it all

at once. Licking his lips appreciatively -- the potion didn't taste like ass, unlike some of the others -- he accessed his Chaos Points again.

Total Chaos Points Remaining: 116.

3 rd STRATUM OFFEREINGS		
Offering	Chaotic Cost	Traits
Ring of Health Siphon	16 points	Provides a Ring that will provide the user +32 Health for every enemy killed. Cannot exceed max Health. Decreases Mana by -31 while being worn.
Race Change	25 points	You may change your race . Your new race will be randomly selected from among three races you pick and a fourth choice you have not selected. You can only pick races which you have met.
Spell: Akaton Evolution	23 points	Provides the spell: Akaton Evolution . Casting this spell upon a summoned creature or pet will trigger a random evolution. It will also lengthen the spell duration of your summoning. This spell

		may not be cast upon sapient beings. This is a spell of Chaos Magic, level 1.
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Richter's eyes widened. This was some serious shit! The ring could be worth hundreds if not thousands of gold. A Warrior would do almost anything to heal while he killed. It could make someone in good armor almost unstoppable. The loss of mana might not even be noticed by a pure melee fighter. Hell, even he could put the ring to good use since he was a combination fighter. The other options were even more tempting though.

The Race Change was definitely interesting. He hadn't even thought that something like that was possible. It seemed like his own race, human, was at a disadvantage in The Land. Every other race received five points per level and most humans only received four. The trade-off, if you could call it that, was that humans could choose to allocate those points to any stat. In contrast, nonhumans typically had one or more stats that increased without their control every time. Aside from that, they only had three points to freely distribute. More stat points were still more stat points in Richter's opinion though.

Humans were also supposedly less restricted in their ability to learn various skills. Richter's Limitless ability made that a moot point, as every

one of his skills was already maxed to a 100% affinity. Still, other races also had perks, like elves' hearing and kobolds' darkvision.

The idea of being a different race had crossed Richter's mind from time to time because of the bonuses. If he was being honest though, he probably wouldn't have been able to accomplish all that he had if he wasn't human. At least not in this part of the world, as the Kingdom of Yves was blatantly xenophobic. Only humans could move around freely in the capital city of Law. Without that freedom, he never would have met Terrod. Without that introduction, he never would have found so many capable people to move to his village or been able to build the infrastructure he now took for granted. He most certainly wouldn't have been able to raid the goblin encampment, and the green-skinned bastards would still have the Bloodstone.

While the Race Change was certainly intriguing, the terms of the offering weren't something he was willing to risk. Richter could happily change into a wood elf, high elf or dwarf, but he had met other repugnant races including demons, goblins and draught. He had seen a great many things since coming to The Land, but not many had been uglier than a troll's face. Being a kobold or a bugbear wouldn't be his idea of fun either. The chaos seed decided to pass on the Race Change offering for the moment. It just wasn't worth the risk.

It was the third offering that really caught his attention. He had honestly known that that was what he was going to buy as soon as the prompts appeared. With a pleasant tingle of anticipation, he obtained his first Higher Energy spell!

Total Chaos Points Remaining: 93

Another small rent in reality appeared in front of him. This one was too small to easily reach his hand through. He had time to look at it quizzically, but before he could do anything else, a beam of grey light shot out of the small hole. It forked as it exited the raw Chaos. One beam touched his head and the other his heart. Richter's pupils dilated and his breath sucked in. He *knew*!

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Akaton Evolution**. Casting this spell upon a summoned creature or pet will trigger a random evolution. In the case of summoned creatures, it will also lengthen the spell duration of your summoning by 50%. This spell will not work on sapient beings. This is a spell of Chaos Magic, level 1. Cost: 146 (base 183) mana. Duration: 50 minutes. Range: 5 feet. Cast Time: 4 seconds. Cooldown: N/A

Arcane calculations, equations and metaphysical concepts unlocked in

Richter's brain. His breath came fast and short as he mastered complex mental formulations in seconds.

*Know This! You have learned your first **Chaotic spell**! As a Chaos Seed, you are perfectly suited to this branch of magic. Spell costs of Chaos Magic are reduced by -10% per level of Chaos Alignment. All other adverse effects negated. Continued use of Chaotic magic may have a beneficial effect.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Chaos Magic**. The raw stuff of the Universe is now yours to command. A true master of this magic can create worlds... or destroy realities. What have you unleashed upon The Land, O Chaos Seed?*

*Know This! You have learned your first **Higher Energy** spell. Your pursuit of power will change the very nature of The Land. Do not use primordial forces without reason. It will not go unnoticed.*

Despite the ominous tag line at the end, a faint smile made its way onto Richter's face. He had Higher Energy magic! He had *Higher Energy* magic! Even better than that, the fact that he was a Chaos Seed made him immune to any ill effects! He had honestly been worried about that. In terms of intensity, it seemed like the progression was Basic Elements, like Life, Death and Water magic, followed by Deep Magic and then Higher Energies.

Richter hadn't suffered any ill effects from using the Basic Elements, but even low-level spells of Deep Magic, like Blood and Spirit magic, could

take a terrible toll. He had been dreading what the price of a Higher Energy spell would be. Now it looked like he got a free pass! Between that and the 20% reduction in spell cost, it was like Chaos magic had been specifically tailored for him. One hundred and eighty-three points was a ridiculously high cost for a level one spell, and even the discounted cost of one hundred and forty-six mana was nothing to sneeze at, but he would pay it gladly.

He was about to stand and summon a creature so he could cast his Chaos spell for the first time when he heard footsteps in the corridor outside of his room. A few moments later, Randolphus entered with a guard trailing him. The chamberlain bowed upon seeing him, and the guard clapped a fist to his chest. The sentry waited outside the entrance and the chamberlain closed the door, giving the two of them privacy. Pulling a chair close, he sat beside Richter's bedside. It had taken months for the chaos seed to get his proper and decorous chamberlain to sit down without permission. Still, he rarely did so.

Between that, and the slightly sorrowful look on the man's face, Richter knew that bad news was coming. Randolphus held his ever-present clipboard and papers in his hands, but on closer inspection, the chaos seed could see that they were gripped a bit tighter than necessary to keep them secure. The chamberlain looked at his liege for a moment, not in discomfort, but more to ease himself into the discussion.

When he spoke, his voice was soft, but strong. He was not eager to share this news, but neither did he shy away from the conversation. Richter's already high respect for the man went up another notch. Though he wasn't aware of it, a prompt had appeared in Randolphus' vision, indicating Richter's increased regard. The man dismissed it without reaction, though it made what he was saying that much harder, "If this is a good time, my lord, I have a final tally of the dead."

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Of the four hundred and fifteen souls that had comprised the allied army, only three hundred and eight had returned. Forty-six Mist Village guards had died along with fifty-two of Hisako's sprites. Nine meidon sprites had died as well. With a heavy sigh, Randolphus told him that the death of the bonded sprites had led to even further tragedy. Each death of a meidon sprite had harmed the pixie they were bonded to, something that the chamberlain called *sakeru*.

"They died?" Richter asked in a leaden voice. Hearing about exactly how many families had been ripped asunder had been like a dagger to his heart. Knowing that the deaths of his men had also caused the literal decimation of an entire species that was under his protection was a hammer blow to the hilt of that dagger. He didn't know how he could face his people. How he could face Elora.

Randolphus sighed and put his papers down, "Some did die, but

others... changed. Queen Elora was so distraught that she could not fully explain the concept to me. She has kept all of her children close to the Quickening since this *sakeru* began. Which is honestly for the best. They began to sing and their racial ability, Celestial Pixie Song, activated. Their lament made a horrible melody, and anyone who heard it was struck with a debuff, *Severe Depression*. Some of our people sank right to the ground, unable to even muster the strength to move, while others just started to weep uncontrollably. We had to evacuate anyone that was within a hundred yards of the Quickening. Some of the men and women are still abed. I believe the singing has stopped and the debuff has slowly worn off, but some of those afflicted are still inconsolable.”

Richter nodded, knowing this was something he would have to deal with personally and soon. In the meantime, there were other considerations, “Have all the arrangements been made to put our dead to rest?”

“Yes, my lord. The various races have their own funeral rites and some families have requested certain conditions be met, but none object to the burial. They understand the necessity of laying the dead to rest quickly after a battle. Many would not even expect such treatment from a lord. Lady Hisako has already enspelled the bodies to ensure they cannot rise again. Unfortunately,” he paused for a moment as if he was about to mention something delicate, “the size of the grave prohibits us from burying them

inside the walls. I have had hunters and guards sweeping the area however, and the immediate forest appears to be free of monsters and predators. The entire contingent of guards will also be well armed to ensure the safety of the villagers. I have had more mist lights from inside the village taken outside the walls to ensure that hostile beasts cannot attack without being seen. Even with these precautions, we should not tarry outside long, however.”

“Why don’t we just bury them within the walls?” Richter asked. “We have enough space.”

“Yes, we do, my lord,” Randolphus acceded slowly. “and if you order it, it will be so. I would suggest that we look to the future as well as heed the present. While there is more than enough room today, it is my hope, and I know yours as well, that the village will continue to grow. We could one day be faced with the choice of building over a gravesite as the space within the village becomes precious. I do not wish to be indelicate, my lord, but I do not believe this will be the last large grave we dig. It seemed prudent to take such harsh realities into account.”

Randolphus’s words were painful, but Richter couldn’t disagree with a single point. Instead, he just clapped his chamberlain on the shoulder, “Great job as always, man. I want a list of all who died before the funeral,” Randolphus handed him an already prepared document. The man truly was a wizard. “My weapons and armor?” the chaos seed asked.

“They are being repaired now, my lord. I will have them brought to you as soon as possible.”

Richter nodded, “Thank you, Randy. I mean it. I couldn’t do this without you.”

The chamberlain bowed his head, “It is my honor to serve, my lord.”

“Is there anything else?”

“Yes, my lord. While you were sleeping, I organized a search of the hill that has appeared outside of the village gates. No one seems to want to approach the cave that is shaped like a snake’s head for some reason...” He paused to see if Richter had anything to add about that particular topic, but the chaos seed didn’t want to derail the conversation by sharing info about the Dungeon yet.

The chamberlain continued when Richter didn’t proffer any information, “In addition to the cave however, several buildings were transported with the hill. Most had collapsed, but two remained standing. They are damaged, but should be salvageable. One of the village builders examined them and told me that both are specific to the goblin race; a Bat Roost and a Goblinhold.”

Randolphus shuffled his papers, “A Bat Roost apparently attracts bats over time that can be easily domesticated. The type of bat would depend on

what is available in the region and the level of the building. A Goblinhold functions much like a Townhall for humans. It gives various perks to the goblins in an encampment or village. I wanted to know what you would like to have done with the buildings. We cannot benefit from the settlement bonuses that they provide as we are not goblins. We could salvage raw materials from them, however. The builders suggested we deconstruct them, but the decision is, of course, yours to make, my lord.” A moment later, he repeated, “My lord?”

Richter nodded absently. He had actually only been half-listening to his chamberlain for the past minute or so. His attention was pretty fairly focused on the death report. It did not go unnoticed that Randy was trying to redirect him though, so he decided to go along with it. There would be more than enough focus on death as soon as the funeral started. For the first time in a while, he accessed the *Building* section of his village interface.

The first buildings in the village had been built without any specific blueprints. In The Land, anything could be built by anyone, but just like in any other world, if you didn’t know what you were doing, the structure would most likely be garbage. The Land took it a step further though. Buildings could reach levels that gave bonuses to the building or maybe even the settlement as a whole. To build such structures, whomever was constructing it had to have either memorized a blueprint or have it in front of him.

Otherwise, they were the same as any building on Earth. The ones that had been made without blueprints were deemed “level zero.”

Richer went through the list.

Building Name	Traits	Level
Longhouse x5 (wood)	<i>Durability:</i> 124/127 <i>Quality:</i> Well Built Houses 30/60/90 people (comfortable/adequate/overcrowded)	0
Livestock Pen x4 (wood)	<i>Durability:</i> 161-163/170 <i>Quality:</i> Above Average Houses livestock, capacity varies based on animal. 60x20 yards	0
Skath Pen (steel net)	<i>Durability:</i> 582/614 <i>Quality:</i> Well Crafted Circular pen, 20 yards in diameter	0
Walls (mix of earthwork and marbled	Hard packed Earthworks (31%) – <i>Defense:</i> +2 to +7 <i>Durability:</i> Variable due to variation in Building Quality.	0

quartz)	<i>Quality:</i> Slum to Well Crafted Marbled Quartz (69%) – <i>Defense:</i> +38 <i>Durability:</i> 15,225/15,225 <i>Quality:</i> Well Built <i>Building Bonus:</i> +10% defense for defenders (2% per foot) +15% Line of Sight (3% per foot) +10% distance to ranged attacks (2% per foot)	
Ship Cradle (wood)	<i>Durability:</i> 103/103 <i>Quality:</i> Well Built <i>Building Bonus:</i> +5% Shipbuilding speed bonus +5% bonus to ship stats	0
Healer's Hut (wood)	<i>Durability:</i> 1,058/1,060 <i>Quality:</i> Well Built <i>Building Bonus:</i> +5% village Health +5% disease prevention +5% recuperation speed after injury	0

Trenches	Inner Trench – 20 feet deep x 30 feet wide. Lined with wooden stakes. Outer Trench – 15 feet deep x 21 feet wide. Lined with wooden stakes.	0
Towers x 18 (earthwork)	<i>Durability:</i> 176/176 <i>Quality:</i> Slum <i>Defense:</i> +3 +60% Line of Sight (3% per foot)	0
Roads (gravel)	<i>Durability:</i> 4/7 <i>Quality:</i> Slum +5% Movement speed	0

The next series of buildings were his Core buildings. More than anything else, they were the secret to his village's power. The main reason every single one of his guards hadn't been wiped out in the battle with the goblins was the fact that they had superior weapons and potions. Even with the sprites bolstering them and luring the goblins into traps, it had been the Forge of Heaven's arms and armor that had kept his people alive. Hundreds more would still have died without Hisako using her one-off magic from her Place of Power to revive them. Thinking about that brought back to mind

those men and women he hadn't saved. To help stave off the guilt, he dove back into the interface.

<u>Forge of</u> <u>Heavens</u> (Elementum)	<i>Durability:</i> 5,500,000/5,500,000* <i>Quality:</i> CORE <small>*Self-healing building</small> <i>Building Bonus:</i> 1) +10% chance of an item of a given quality being automatically upgraded to a higher quality once completed. 2) Elementum Bonus: Weapons have +10% damage to spell barriers. Each piece of armor has a +2% resistance to a specific type of magic determined by the properties of your Forge. 3) Each Magic Forge will have a specific character based upon the location where it has been created. The movement of heavenly bodies are now clearly seen by you, even in the light of day. Based upon which cosmic alignments are present above, there is a small	CORE Level 1
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	<p>chance of the weapon or armor obtaining certain powers.</p> <p>Absorbed Enchantments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Weapon<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Damage effect<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Life2. Freeze (Water)2. Damage type<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Unarmed3. Slaying<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Beast2. Goblin4. Confusion (Dark magic)<ul style="list-style-type: none">2. Armor<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Darkvision2. Resistance<ul style="list-style-type: none">1. Earth3. Increased movement speed4. Increased attack speed	
<u>Dragon's</u>	<i>Durability: 8,000,000/8,000,000*</i>	CORE

<p><u>Cauldron</u> (Aged Glass)</p>	<p><i>Quality:</i> CORE</p> <p><small>*Self-healing building</small></p> <p><i>Building Bonus:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Any potions created by the Dragon's Cauldron will have a 0.08% chance of having an extra effect that will permanently increase a characteristic, skill, affinity, or resistance. Potions you create will grow stronger over time. 2) +10% chance of a potion being automatically upgraded to a higher quality once completed. 3) +10% chance of a potion being successfully created. 4) Placing any one base ingredient or resource into the central cauldron will allow you to transmute it into another. The conversion ratio will be greatly determined by the abundance of both the initial resource and the final resource in the surrounding lands. The Cauldron can only make ingredients or resources that have already been placed in the central cauldron and 	<p>Level 1</p>
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subsequently consumed.

5) Placing an assortment of ingredients into the central cauldron will allow you to know if a potion can be created from that combination. At the Cauldron's current level, this can be used once per day.

6) Placing a potion into the central cauldron will give you the chance to learn the exact recipe used to create the potion. The potion is used up during this procedure. If local equivalents of the ingredients exist, those will be provided as a substitute recipe. Each time the potion is created there is a small chance to learn another recipe for either that potion level, the level below, or the level above.

7) Your Map Making skill is synergistic with your Cauldron. While ingredients common to your location will not be marked, the general location of rarer ingredients may be indicated. Increase your Herb Lore and exploration skills to increase the effectiveness of this bonus.

8) If a potion is successfully created, it can be placed into the central cauldron. If enough materials can be provided, there is a **100%** chance to make nine additional potions of the same level and strength. Potions created in this way cannot be used to trigger this or the Cauldron's other powers.

Known Recipes:

- 1) Luck Potion. Level: Elixir
- 2) Restore Health. Level: Brew, Tincture, Solution
- 3) Restore Stamina. Level: Brew, Tincture
- 4) Restore Mana. Level: Brew, Tincture, Solution
- 5) ...

Seeing the stats of the Core buildings spelled out in black and white, or black and gold rather, impressed even Richter. The enchantments the Forge of Heavens had been able to learn were really adding up.

Enchantments were literally more precious than jewels, and journeyman crafters normally had to devote ten to twenty years of their life to a master in order to learn even one. The fact that he had able to accumulate ten in the Forge was a treasure many would kill for.

The list of abilities of the Dragon's Cauldron was even more extensive. The potions the Cauldron could make had saved Richter's life, and the lives of his people, time and again. The Potion of Gaseous Form, Red Foxfire and the Potion of Selak's Luck were only a few of the recipes supplied by the Cauldron. Richter hadn't understood the true power of a Core building at first, but if they could achieve so much even at level one, it was obvious why wars were fought over Magic Cores.

As Richter scanned through the potion list of the Cauldron, he was extremely pleased. The list had grown quite extensive. It was obvious that Tabia had not been idle. Some of the potions were even surprises to Richter. There was one entry lower on the list called "Metal Decay" that he resolved to ask the mercenary elf maiden about as soon as possible.

The next series of entries showed the level one buildings of the village. They had been built with a specific blueprint and had improved building bonuses. At the bottom of the list were the goblin structures.

Workshop	<i>Durability:</i> 15,988/15,988	1
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(Marbled Quartz)	<i>Building Quality:</i> Well Built <i>Building Bonus:</i> +1% chance of a building being spontaneously increased one quality level on completion +10% increase to Production when erecting Buildings +10% increase to Building Durability	
House of Scholarship (marbled quartz)	<i>Durability:</i> 15,911/15,914 <i>Quality:</i> Well Built <i>Building Bonus:</i> +10% Increase in village Research speed +10% to Scribing speed and success while inside building +10% to village education (knowledge retention, conceptual understanding, etc.) +1% chance to have a scientific breakthrough	1
Bat Roost (wood) DEFUNCT	<i>Durability:</i> 131/573 <i>Quality:</i> Above Average <i>Building Bonus:</i> <u>(All bonuses negated until Durability increased above 50%)</u> +10% to strength of bats living in the roost	1

	+10% attraction of bats +10% chance of attracting a more powerful bat	
Goblinhold (hardwood) DEFUNCT	<i>Durability:</i> 419/902 <i>Quality:</i> Well Built <i>Building Bonus: (All bonuses negated until</i> <i><u>Durability increased above 50%</u></i> Allows governmental options Allows creation of buildings +1 level above level of Goblinhold in your settlement Allows accumulation of Diplomacy Points	1

One thing was clear to Richter. He needed more blueprints. While the “Building Bonuses” might be modest, they certainly added up. Even the “Level 0” buildings, or “huts,” gave a definite bonus to the village. The +5% to recuperation after injury was something every guard would appreciate in the days to come. Before he could examine the interface any further, another prompt appeared in his vision.

Know This! As Master of this Place of Power and village, you are bound to your settlement. As with all rulers, your character, abilities, and soul will affect your land and your people. Your **Limitless** ability applies to the

buildings that your settlement can use. Your village is not limited by race, alignment or any other specifics in the buildings which it can benefit from. Purchase and procure building Schematics to construct better buildings.

“We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.”

Richter read the prompt again. Silence reigned for a few moments with Randolphus looking at him. Then he looked up, “I want the buildings repaired.” After a moment’s thought, he clarified, “I want them moved from the hill to the inside of the village, then I want them repaired.”

“Ahhh, I am not sure that is possible, my lord,” Randolphus said frowning.

“I also want them to be examined and blueprints to be made,” Richter said, ignoring any possibility of his will not being done. He looked at his chamberlain, and the pain that he had pushed down for a moment carried through, “I need this to be done, man. The goblin encampment had to be dealt with, but we paid a high price. If we can salvage these buildings, it gives a bit more meaning to our people’s sacrifice. Help me honor our fallen.” There was a quiet desperation in his voice.

Randolphus looked back at him, understanding something about what Richter was feeling that the chaos seed didn’t even grasp himself. His liege

didn't just need to protect himself and his people. Richter needed to make the battle, and the deaths that it had caused, mean something. He said the only thing he could, "It will be done, my liege. It is my honor to serve."

"Good," Richter breathed out, nodding. "That's good." The relief in his voice was obvious and Randolphus was reminded just how much his liege cared about his people. After having served many callous men that had deigned to call themselves "lords," it was almost too good to be true to once again serve a man who valued the lives of those beneath him.

A prompt appeared in Richter's vision.

Your desire to serve your people, as well as rule them, has moved

Randolphus. *You have gained +731 Relationship Points. Total Relationship Points: +20,517*

*Congratulations! Your relationship with Randolphus has improved from **Admiring (+10,000)** to **Steadfast (+20,000)**. "I know I can rely upon you."*

Richter's eyes widened in surprise. Before he could speak, Randolphus went down on one knee and said, "Through service, ascendance."

The chaos seed reached out and hand and laid it on his friend's shoulder, finishing the motto of the village, "Through dedication, transcendence."

Randolphus raised his head and looked Richter in the eye. There was an intensity to his gaze that the chaos seed had not seen before. The chamberlain's voice was strong, "I am truly honored to serve you, my lord. I do not make promises that I cannot keep and I have learned that the future is promised to no man. Please know that, today, I am thankful to be in your service. Long may you reign."

Richter blinked, both flattered by Randolphus's words and taken aback by his sincerity. "Thank you," he said simply as the man stood.

They held each other's gaze for another second, then Randolphus looked as if he had come to a decision. He started shuffling his papers. If Richter didn't know better, he would think the unflappable man was nervous. Randolphus pulled a page out of the stack of papers. "There are a few other matters to address, my lord. We should have just enough time to cover them all before the ceremony."

CHAPTER 10 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



The next thing Randy let him know was that more had been found on the hill than just buildings. A large number of weapons and armor had been transported from the goblins' stores. Most of it was extremely low quality and had scant durability remaining, unfortunately, but it might still have some utility as scrap. The chamberlain said he had already arranged to have it taken to the Forge of Heavens for smelting. One building was thought to have been an armory though because it had items of higher quality and even three enchanted weapons. The chamberlain handed Richter a sheet of paper with an inventory.

High Steel Goblin Cleaver	Damage: 12-15
+2	Durability: 35/41
	Item Class: Uncommon
	Quality: Well Crafted
	Weight: 1.2 kg

	Traits: +2 Damage
Orichalcum Round Shield of Rust	<p>Defense: 11</p> <p>Durability: 64/64</p> <p>Item Class: Unusual</p> <p>Quality: Well Crafted</p> <p>Weight: 3.3 kg</p> <p>Traits: Each charge released from this shield will cause 0.3 points of Durability damage to the weapon that strikes it.</p> <p>Works only against metal weapons.</p> <p>Charges: 97/97</p>
High Steel War Hammer of Soul Trap	<p>Damage: 16-20</p> <p>Durability: 38/44</p> <p>Item Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Quality: Above Average</p> <p>Weight: 3.5 kg</p> <p>Traits: Any creature struck by this weapon is afflicted with the spell <i>Soul Trap</i> for 5 seconds.</p>

The +2 Damage enchantment was more than useful. It was a *static* enchantment. *Static* enchantments were superior to *active* in that they weren't dependent on charges. They were inferior in other ways, of course. The magic on Richter's elementum blade was far more powerful than just +2 Damage, for instance. His weapon both imparted *Sonic Damage* with each strike and possessed the capability to *Disarm* his opponents. The downside was that every time the enchantment was unleashed, it used up charges. If the charges were completely depleted, the weapon was for all intents and purposes just a regular sword until the enchantments built back up or were restored with filled soul gems. In contrast, the attribute boosts on his armor were an excellent example of powerful *static* enchantments, which never ran out.

He hadn't understood the real difference between *static* and *active* at first. It had helped a great deal when Gloran, the other village enchanter, had explained the difference between enchantment levels and enchantment ranks. *Active* enchantments could achieve higher ranks, meaning they would increase in strength concordant with a rise in rank. Reaching rank two for his *Freeze* enchantment had increased the base *cold* damage his weapon imparted from +1 to +2. It had also made it more likely for the weapon's *Freeze* effect to trigger, something that could turn part or all of an enemy's body to ice for a short time.

Another important factor regarding *static* enchantments was cost. Put simply, they cost more. Every enchantment Richter could add onto a piece of armor or a weapon had a base cost that had to be paid with captured souls. His *Freeze* enchantment, for example, had a base cost of three. The first rank cost three soul points, the second rank six points, then twelve, then twenty-one, thirty-three, etc. The *static* enchantment +1 damage, on the other hand, cost more initially, requiring five soul points. It added exactly the same damage to a weapon as the first rank of *Freeze*, but without the added effect of turning an opponent to ice.

Another large difference between *static* and *active* enchantments was that the former were immune to one of the Forge of Heaven's most prolific abilities. When most people learned an enchantment, they could only imbue an item with it at that specific rank. If you were taught *Fire Damage* rank three then you could only enchant weapons at rank three. The Forge allowed you to learn other ranks. Each time Richter learned a new enchantment, it was rank one, but the more he practiced it, there was a chance that he could learn the next rank. He was currently up to rank five with *Freeze*.

The *static* enchantments, unfortunately, were not susceptible to the Forge's ranking ability. The three that were known by the Forge were +1 *Damage*, +10% *Durability*, and +2 *Defense*. The only way for the Forge to learn more was to find more enchanted gear unless Richter found a way to

gain more through his Specialty. Hopefully, Hafiz's sons would be back from their trading trip soon with more enchanted items. In the meantime, it was nice to have the option of adding another light to the elementum anvil.

Enchantment levels were completely different than ranks. All the enchantments he knew were level one, or *weak*. They apparently followed a similar progression to spells: *weak, minor, inferior, improved, strong, potent, superior, powerful*, and *grand*. He was currently investing mana into his Essence Specialty to unlock his first *minor* enchantment, the second level of *Sonic Attack*. Gloran had told him that higher level enchantments could manifest in any number of ways, but they were almost always powerful. They came with greater requirements but were worth the cost.

While the cleaver would be useful, the Shield of Rust also piqued his interest. During the goblin raid, Caulder's training of the guards had saved many lives. Forming a shield wall had let them withstand a numerically superior force. Richter was already envisioning a line of shields enchanted with the *Rust* enchantment. If his people held out long enough, the weapons of their foes would literally fall apart. Even if the enemy's swords and maces were not completely destroyed, a loss of durability would lower the damage they could inflict considerably.

It was the third item that really caught his attention. Despite the fact that it was only *uncommon* rarity unlike the *unusual* rarity of the shield, it had

an enchantment that he had wanted for a while: Soul Trap. As an Essence Enchanter, he could purchase the enchantment of any spell he knew. That cost precious Talent Points though. Now, with any luck, he wouldn't have to spend them!

Randolphus told him that no other worthwhile object had been found, but this wasn't a surprise. It was the understatement of the century, but they had left the field of battle in a hurry. Yoshi had laid claim to the gear of the goblin commander Radg-or as a prize, something that Richter didn't begrudge him. The Warrior half-sprite had slain the Barbarian in single combat.

It had been physically impossible to loot many of the goblins' bodies as they had still been cocooned in the web traps when the allied forces had quit the field. The second goblin army that had been rushing towards them had been even bigger than the first one they had defeated. The priority had been to protect the freed prisoners, not to strip the dead of anything valuable.

Richter handed the weapons and armor summary back to Randolphus, telling him to bring the enchanted items to the Forge in the morning. With any luck, the Forge of Heavens would learn three new enchantments. The chamberlain took the paper back and promptly handed Richter another. It was a list of sundry items that had also been recovered: a few potions, some trash jewelry - none of it was noteworthy. The one saving grace was that a

small chest had been found under a collapsed bit of wood. The thorough chamberlain had already counted and assessed the contents. Richter's eyebrows rose. "Is this right?"

Randolphus sniffed as if affronted by the very possibility that his figures would be off. "Undoubtedly, my lord."

Richter looked back down at the page, slightly amused at the chamberlain's miffed attitude. It showed the actual contents of the chest and then converted them into gold pieces for ease of understanding.

RAW CURRENCY	VALUE IN GOLD CROWNS
472 copper coins	4.72 gold
305 silver coins	30.5 gold
14 silver bands	14 gold
2 silver weights	5 gold
68 gold coins	68 gold
4 gold weights	100 gold

Richter had only seen bands once before when trading with Hafiz, the grandfatherly merchant in Law. He had later learned that the sweet old man act was, well, an act, and the white-bearded bastard was actually a Professed

Trader. Richter had ground his teeth at the time. He'd thought he'd done well at the bargaining table, but the truth was that he'd probably been taken to the cleaners. What made it worse was that he hadn't even realized it. It was kind of like bragging about sleeping with a hot chick and then discovering you were only her third stop of the night.

He had asked Randolphus about it once, quoting the prices he had paid for certain items. Afterward, he had asked if the chamberlain thought those had been fair prices. The man had opened his mouth, then slowly closed it and, after a bout of extremely fake-sounding coughing, had walked away, claiming he needed to get a glass of water.

Still, Richter had made his peace with it... mostly. The point was, the finger-length strips of metal called "bands" were worth ten coins of the same amount. He hadn't seen "weights" before, but Randy's calculations let him deduce that each weight was worth... Richter looked up quickly, "A weight is worth *twenty-five* coins?"

"Yes, my lord," Randolphus said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Then that means-" Richter said to himself as he looked back down at the paper. He flipped to the next page and whistled softly, "We gained two hundred and twenty-two gold?"

“And two silvers and two coppers, my lord,” Randolphus corrected, exacting as ever.

Richter blinked. His village had just gained the equivalent of twenty-two thousand and two hundred dollars! That didn’t even include the value of the loot they had obtained. Most workers only earned four to five silvers every fortnight. Put another way, they only made fifty bucks every two weeks. That was if they were lucky. He had just gained a fortune! His heart started beating faster and his excitement soared.

That was when he remembered that the money had not been free. It had been paid for in blood. More than a hundred lives had been spent to gain this wealth. His mood fell, but he didn’t fall into the trap of self-recrimination as he once might have. Richter just reminded himself to never forget the “human” cost of progress. Alma nuzzled his hand, bringing a faint smile to his face and a small degree of lightness to his suddenly heavy heart. He focused back on Randolphus. He had responsibilities, and there was work to be done. With a somber voice, he asked, “What is the overall state of the treasury now?”

Randolphus handed over another sheet of paper. While Richter read, the chamberlain recited from memory, “Not including the spoils from the raid, the treasury now stands at two thousand seven hundred and fifty-one gold coins; two gold bands; four thousand three hundred and eighty-six silver

coins; eleven thousand three hundred and six copper coins; eighty-four iron bits-”

“Iron bits?” Richter interrupted.

“Yes, my lord,” Randolphus answered absently. When he saw his liege’s questioning glance though, he clarified, “Iron bits are a form of currency used by commoners. As much of your money came from selling jewels, you would most likely not have come across them. The coins are too small a denomination to normally be seen outside of rural areas or the poorest ghettos of the cities. Ten iron bits are worth one copper coin.”

Richter nodded in understanding and the chamberlain continued, “The treasury also contains five thousand two hundred and thirty-four kobold silvers. The kobold silver should be able to be traded at a one-to-one ratio for gold. With that and including the spoils from the raid, the Mist Village has the equivalent of eight thousand seven hundred and fifty-eight gold; nine silvers and seven coppers in hard currency.”

The chaos seed’s eye widened at hearing how much wealth he had amassed. It was more than most workers would ever earn in a lifetime. Back in the game, it would have been the equivalent of almost a million dollars! He was sitting pretty, but he also knew how quickly that wealth could vanish. While the village was doing fine right now, there would inevitably be

expenses as they grew.

Even low-level spell books could cost a dozen gold or more. The blood that had been used to make his Dragon's Cauldron had cost him over six hundred! Richter would have to purchase resources that weren't available in his area, buy devices that they couldn't make themselves and plan for the likely hundreds of other expenditures that would arise. The village economy wasn't something he could ignore any longer.

Randolphus continued, "We have forty-seven pieces of Tefonim jewelry which we should be able to sell for between fifteen and thirty thousand gold. We also have thirteen duplicate Dark Khan coins that could be sold, but I would advise against it."

Richter nodded in agreement. The Dark Khan coins were also kobold silver, but were vastly more valuable due to the fact that they were part of a quest. Supposedly, finding one of each Dark Khan coin would lead to an ancient kobold treasure or power. According to Randolphus, murder and torture were a common part of the history of such coins. Best not to reveal he had them unless absolutely necessary. At least, best not to reveal it *again*, an error that the chamberlain had no problem reminding him of at that very moment.

"My lord, I know you showed the coins to Abbas and his brothers, but

I must remind you that wars have been fought over what is in this village. The Core buildings, the Quickening, the Dark Khan coins... we must be wary of others finding out about the treasures located here. I believe you will find that the five-foot wall around the village is a poor defense indeed against a determined army. To that point," Randolphus put his papers down and looked his liege in the eye, "is that a Dungeon on the hill?"

Richter didn't really know why his chamberlain was being so intense, "It is. Is that a problem? Hisako told me that Dungeons were special, but it's not as powerful as the Forge of Heaven or the Dragon's Cauldron, right? And there's was no way that it could be as special as a celestial tree like the Quickening."

"You make a valid point, my lord," the chamberlain responded. The concern in his voice belied the statement, however. "As I have already said, this village has a quite frankly mind-boggling amount of treasure. Core buildings are mostly spoken of in the abstract. Everyone knows that they exist, but no commoner, and even most lords, would ever imagine they could possess one. The Quickening is even harder to believe in. It is a legend come to life. I doubt there is another such tree in all The Land, and I am almost completely certain there are no other celestial trees in the River Peninsula.

"Dungeons are something altogether different, however, and may

bring us notoriety that these other wonders have not. Every boy and girl is raised on stories of adventure and treasure. While they could never conceive of seeing, let alone owning, a Core building, almost every denizen of The Land will fight and kill to reach a Dungeon. And every Adventurer will have heard the Call.”

With that pronouncement, Randolphus did something that caught Richter completely off-guard. He stood and lifted the bottom of his shirt. Under the black tunic, the chamberlain was sporting washboard abs. Richter was about to awkwardly compliment him and then ask what the hell was going on, but after a moment, a silvery square appeared in the center of his chest. It was a maze, and as Richter stared at the symbol, the lines shifted as if he were seeing deeper and deeper into a confusing network of tunnels without end. The chaos seed had seen a mark like it before, on his own chest. Both he and Randolphus had the Mark of the Adventurer. There were slight differences to the chamberlain’s tattoo, but there was no mistaking the similarity.

“You’re an Adventurer?” Richter asked. Over the past several months, it had become abundantly clear to him that his proper chamberlain was more than just a valet. He hadn’t forced the matter though, because... well, honestly because Randolphus was invaluable and Richter doubted he could run the village without him.

Randy hesitated for a moment, but then answered strongly, “The Kingdom of Yves has more than one Dungeon. The strongest is in the middle of Law. I gained the Mark the first time I entered.”

“There is a Dungeon in the capital city?” Richter asked incredulously.

“Yes. The palace is built directly above it. The Dungeon having been built atop the royal family’s Place of Power is one of the secrets to their longstanding power and success. For centuries, members of the royal family have risked the dangers of the Hall of Elemental Hunters to gain wealth and power. It has made them strong and healthy and given their lives unnatural longevity. The King would disappear for days at a time occasionally. He required that I accompany him now and again.”

Randolphus had been the personal advisor to the old King. The ruler asking him to stay by his side was a perfectly plausible explanation for having the Mark. Still, Richter looked at the man’s nonplussed face for a few moments, then just replied, “Uh huh.”

Randolphus didn’t so much as twitch an eyelid, “As such, I can provide valuable information about the inner workings of Dungeons. I would appreciate it if you would grant me access to this Dungeon, my lord. In that way, I will be able to serve you in the same way as the old King.”

“Not a bad idea,” Richter responded slowly, continuing to stare at the

Randolphus' almost remarkably passive face. "I am sure you know that Dungeons can be dangerous for a noncombatant though."

"I do have some skill defending myself, my lord," Randolphus replied levelly.

The two men continued to stare at one another and a feeling of disquiet began to grow in Richter's chest. Questions that he had willfully ignored for months came flooding into his mind. He trusted Randolphus, or at least he always had, but hairs were rising on the back of his neck. Just what was it that the chamberlain was hiding? What was in his past that had given him skills like Code Breaking? As he stared into the chamberlain's eyes, the weight of the battle, the deaths of his people and the responsibilities he carried all combined to make him feel like he had a boulder on his shoulders.

His jaw began to clench. He needed to know. People lived and died based on his decisions every day. How could he make those decisions well if he didn't even know the truth about the man he relied on the most?

Randolphus had been amazing and indispensable, but the time for blissful ignorance had passed. Alma picked up on his mood and stalked forward on the bed. Her tail switched back and forth as she looked at the chamberlain.

Don't do anything, my love, he thought to her, **but be ready.**

When Richter finally spoke, it was in a slow and steady tone. His voice was weary but sure. “Randolphus. I know that I could not have done all this without you. I am thankful, but I also know you have secrets in your past. You have more power in this village than anyone save myself. To be clear, I have no complaints as to how you have used it, but I have the lives of hundreds of people in my hands. Men and women have died because of my orders. Our list of enemies is growing, and I cannot afford to keep giving you my trust if you won’t give me yours in return.”

Randolphus’ drew in a breath as if to speak, but Richter didn’t stop, “I have never really questioned you, but it’s obvious you were more than just a servant to the old King of Yves. You were more than just a valet. One thing has become clear to me since coming to The Land: the choices you make sculpt you in a very real way. After walking through halls of power, there is no way you remained untouched.” He said the next three words, slowly and deliberately, “Who are you?” His face remained impassive, but inside, he hoped and prayed that his newly risen relationship with Randolphus would keep this conversation from descending into violence.

The chamberlain blinked twice. Then in a low voice he replied, “I do trust you, my lord. If you truly want an answer, however, my words are for you and you alone.” His eye flickered to the guard standing just outside of the room. The meaning was clear. If Richter wanted an answer, the guard

would have to leave.

It was Richter's turn to blink and consider. Did he send away his only support in a potentially dangerous situation? Did he send away the only witness to what might turn into an... unpleasant situation? The chaos seed looked at the secretive man in front of him and went with his gut. Secrets or no, Randolphus had been loyal and true to him. And he remembered his own words. How could he expect the man to trust him if he didn't extend trust himself? Raising his voice, he called out, "Guard."

The man stepped smartly into the room, and with a last glance at Randolphus, Richter gave an order, "Go check on my weapons and armor. Bring them if they are ready, but don't have anyone replace you at your post. I need to speak to my chamberlain alone."

His guard clapped a fist to his chest in salute and moved off at a jog. His chainmail armor jingled as he moved and soon the sound faded away. While the two men waited for privacy, Richter's hand inched towards his pillow. Ever since his murder and castration at the hands of the assassin Sonirae, he was never far from a weapon. A high steel dagger enchanted with *Freeze* lay sheathed under his pillow. As they looked at one another, Richter took a moment to *Analyze* the man sitting across from him.

Name: Randolphus	Race: Human	Disposition: Trusting
Level: 19		Active Effects:

		<<Present and Unknown>>
STATS		
Health: 210	Mana: 140	Stamina: 350
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 12	Agility: 22	Dexterity: 23
Constitution: 24	Endurance: 23	Intelligence: 21
Wisdom: 17	Charisma: 16	Luck: 14
DESCRIPTION		
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.		

Randolphus was only one level shy of gaining a Profession. Richter had checked in the past, but the man had come far since then. This wasn't a surprise, as everyone in the village had leveled with the growth of the Quickening and the reemergence of the Celestial Pixies. There was nothing to make Richter suspicious of what he saw. Even the chamberlain's stat points seemed to have been distributed equally across all of his characteristics.

Nothing in the profile raised any red flags at all, with one exception. Richter's *Analyze* skill had leveled after examining the hundreds of prisoners released from the goblin encampment. Reaching skill level fifteen had added a new capability. He could now see buffs, debuffs and other active effects of

those he used his skill on. The prisoners' active effects had been a predictable mix of *Exhaustion*, *Dehydration*, *Malnutrition* and an assortment of diseases, injuries, and other negative effects. Despite having used *Analyze* on thousands of people, he hadn't seen anything like what he was seeing on Randolphus' status page. When he focused on "Present and Unknown" a further explanation appeared.

*Your skill in **Analyze** is insufficient to identify any current effects on Randolphus but is sufficient to recognize the presence of one or more unknown effects.*

"You may stop using your identification skill upon me, my lord. It will not truly work unless I allow it." Randolphus said in his cultured, but tired-sounding, voice. Richter tried to hide his surprise but knew he'd probably failed. No one had ever detected him using his *Analyze* skill before. It didn't require an incantation or any hand movements. So how did Randolphus know?

Before Richter could ask, one of the chamberlain's eyes twitched, and he said, "You will most likely have better luck now."

Before Richter's very eyes, Randolphus' face... changed. He was the same man, but his features became rougher, his bearing was more dominant and his eyes... His eyes were predatory in a way that Richter had never seen

before. Randolphus seemed to exude an aura of danger that had not been present just a moment ago. It was as if a sheer cloth had been removed from a statue, revealing the powerful visage beneath. Richter realized that all he had seen in the past was a mere shadow of the man he was seeing now.

His ears were slightly pointed. Not like an elf's, with one sharp upturned point, but instead like they formed a pentagon with curved angles. They sat somewhat flat against his head and at a right angle. To Richter, they looked like the graceful sweep of a fish's side fins. Randolphus' skin also had a slight bluish cast, most notably in his lips.

Strangely, looking at the man without whatever illusion he had just shed made Richter want to trust him even more than before. The energy radiating off him was both intoxicating and reassuring.

Randolphus spoke, and the voice had the same cultured tone but was commanding in a way the chaos seed hadn't heard it before. "Use your skill again now, Lord Richter."

The chaos seed's hand was now firmly clasped around the hilt of his hidden dagger, but he did as Randolphus suggested. Alma's wings were flared and the spines on her neck had risen. She stared intensely at the chamberlain, ready to unleash hell if he threatened her master. Richter's eyes widened in shock at what he could now see.

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Name: Ran'dolphinius	Race: Half-Human/Half-Undine	Profession: Rogue
Disposition: Trusting	Level: 47	Specialty: Spy
		Focus: Counterintelligence
STATS		
Health: 581	Mana: 412	Stamina: 353
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 29	Agility: 54	Dexterity: 52
Constitution: 43	Endurance: 32	Intelligence: 36
Wisdom: 57	Charisma: 59	Luck: 57
DESCRIPTION		
Racial blends are erratic in their disposition and powers. The offspring of such a union can inherit all or none of their parent races' characteristics.		

A thousand questions flew into Richter's head. He didn't know what to ask about first. The man wasn't even human! It wasn't like the chaos seed had a problem with nonhumans. If anything, the humans he'd met since

coming to The Land had a bigger chance of being a'holes. Still, that seemed like a really basic thing to let a guy know about.

Looking at the man's stats, Richter saw that Randolphus' build was fairly well balanced. It occurred to the chaos seed it was somewhat strange applying game terms to real people, but the term "build" definitely still fit. That observation came and went quickly though. There were too many hanging questions to give it more than a moment's thought.

What was a Focus? Exactly how many points did the chamberlain get per level? What did his abilities and marks mean? Of course, that wasn't even the most striking thing. Randy, Ran'dolphinius Richter corrected himself, was level forty-seven. Forty-seven! Richter hadn't met many who were that high a level before. Fewer still that weren't actively trying to kill him. The chaos seed had to hope that was still the case here. On top of all that, Randolphus was a Spy? And what the ever-loving hell was a Focus?

Deciding he wanted an answer to his last question first, Richer opened his mouth to speak, but Randolphus beat him to the punch.

"There are many things I have to say to you, Lord Richter, but foremost among them is this: I am sorry. I am sorry that I have deceived you. I am sorry that you had to ask me to reveal this secret to you. Many times, I almost broached the subject," he sighed and shook his head, "but the

last several months have passed in a blur. Most of all, my lord, I am sorry that I allowed that woman to attack you so savagely.”

There was real regret and remorse in his voice. It occurred to Richter that a Spy could probably lie well enough to fool the devil himself, but still, he couldn't help but want to believe the man. Still, the content of what he was saying made Richter tighten his grip on the hilt of his enchanted dagger.

“Are you telling me you conspired with the Assassin to do-” he swallowed hard, his throat growing dry, “to do what she did to me?” If Ran'dolphinius said “yes,” then only one of them would leave this room alive.

“No,” the Spy answered. An almost imperceptible amount of tension eased in Richter's shoulders, but his eyes still remained fierce and locked on the man sitting across from him. Ran'dolphinius' voice was still sorrowful and his gaze remained unwavering. “I did not know she was an Assassin. I only knew that something did not quite add up about her. I told myself that it was due to the harsh abuse she said she had suffered at the hands of the mercenaries. A story we both now know was a complete falsehood.”

“Oh,” Richter responded hollowly. The horrors of that night still made him break into a cold sweat. Knowing there wasn't some conspiracy did help a bit though, and the beating of his heart eased. “I don't blame you

for what happened. I was taken in by her damsel-in-distress act too.”

Ran’dolphinius shook his head, “You do not understand. I am trained to detect such falsehoods. That is the very purpose of my Focus. If I had not been so concerned with keeping my own secrets, I would have seen through her lies.” He paused for a moment and sighed deeply. “I have not just been pretending to be Randolphus. No matter how skilled an act, there are magics that can see through such deceptions. Sumiko’s spell, for instance.” He trailed off, looking at Richter meaningfully.

The chaos seed blinked. Ran’dolphinius had just admitted that he had been able to beat Sumiko’s *Soul Window* spell. That spell was the primary way that he ensured the loyalty of everyone in the village. One of the questions that everyone answered was, “Do you mean Lord Richter any harm?” If the Spy had been able to deceive the Life master regarding some of the questions, then he definitely could have lied about that question as well.

The two men looked at one another as Ran’dolphinius read his face. The series of conclusions that Richter was drawing were inevitable and inescapable. The hand holding the hilt of the dagger grew slick with sweat. A cold pit formed in his stomach. Richter prepared himself, physically and emotionally, to plunge the blade into the chest of a man he had trusted almost above all others. The Rogue recognized the murder in Richter’s eyes... and

he did nothing.

The moment dragged out even longer. If the Spy had made even the slightest of movements to attack or defend himself, the chaos seed would have attacked. Instead, the half-undine just waited for whatever would come. A full minute passed until Richter commanded in a tightly controlled voice, “Continue.”

His gaze never wavering, Ran’dolphinius spoke, “I am able to conceal my identity so effectively not because of my skills as a Rogue or Talents as a Spy. I can do it because of my heritage. Water magic is the magic of change, illusion, and befuddlement. One of the gifts from my mother was an ability, Undine’s Deception, that allows me to become someone else. I do not pretend to be Randolphus. I actually transform into that identity.”

“You can shape-change?” Richter asked. If that were true, the chamberlain was even more powerful than he had thought.

“No, Lord Richter. The change is not external, though there is clearly some of that as well,” he responded, gesturing to his alien facial features. “The change I undergo is deep and internal. I can adopt the persona of a false identity so completely that almost nothing can pierce the falsehood. The physical change is only the smallest part of my ability.”

Ran’dolphinius’ face grew regretful again before he continued, “The

downside is that using my ability also reduces my capabilities. That is what I have to apologize for, my lord. That is my shame. If I had not been using my Undine's Deception to actually become Randolphus, I would have been able to detect Sonirae's falsehoods. I could have prevented Terrod's capture and saved you from the atrocious acts she committed. Because I was more concerned with protecting my own secrets, I cut myself off from my Specialty and thereby lacked the ability to pierce her deception."

Ran'dolphinius bowed his head, finally breaking eye contact, but not before Richter read the shame on his face. That, coupled with his sincere tone, made the chaos seed sigh. Relaxing ever so slightly, he made a suggestion, "Maybe you should start from the beginning."

Randolphus, or Ran'dolphinius, nodded and began to speak, "I am older than I appear. The father of the current King of Yves was not only my liege. He was also my nephew." With that bombshell, Richter's eyes widened. Now the guy was fucking royalty?

"No, Lord Richter," Ran'dolphinius easily reading his face. "I can never sit atop the throne of Yves. Even if every other member of the bloodline died, I agreed to an unbreakable geas one hundred and two years ago. I have already told you that the royal palace was built upon a Dungeon that was in turn built upon a Place of Power. The ley lines of Fire, Water, Air, and Earth intersect to form the nexus of Powers. The Dungeon reflects

this. It is called the Hall of Elemental Hunters, and creatures strong in those four Basic Elements call it home.

“It is not widely known,” the Spy continued, “that not all creatures which call a Dungeon home are monsters. One day, my father, the grandfather of the current king, was dungeon diving and came upon a lake of cool clear water. The story goes that the air was warm. Steam rose from the surface of the water, and the banks of the pool were covered in soft mosses and fragrant flowers. My father told me that it was one of the most serene and beautiful settings he had ever seen, or would ever see. They would have distrusted it immediately, having found it in the Labyrinth, but it was a Shambhala.”

“Shambhala?” Richter asked.

Ran’dolphinius sighed, “There is much for you to learn, Lord Richter. Dungeons have many rules, as does the Labyrinth as a whole. Some rules are transient. They can change and shift based on something as ephemeral as the position of the sun in the sky. Others, however, are sacrosanct and eternal. One of the oldest and most honored are the Shambhala. No violence will be perpetrated by the denizens of any Dungeon, or even the Labyrinth, against an Adventurer in such a place. Similarly, any Adventurer that causes harm while in a Shambhala will forever lose the Mark of the Adventurer and will gain the Curse of the Labyrinth.”

“And that is?” Richter asked, pushing down the irritation he always had when people explained concepts with other unknown concepts.

“I do not actually know, Lord Richter. No one I have ever known has been foolish enough to break the peace of a Shambhala or earn the curse in another way. It is said, however, that death is a welcome release from the torments it inflicts.”

Richter nodded for him to continue.

“The King’s party had been diving through the Labyrinth for days. They were nearing the end of their return journey and the entrance to their Dungeon was in sight when they were attacked by monsters both fell and numerous. They tried to retreat, but the enemy had chosen their ambush site well. The party was far from a Node and had to fight their way to safety.” Richter wanted to ask another question but decided not to interrupt. “Two of their members died in the opening salvo of the battle. Every surviving member was injured. Exhausted, low on potions and mana, they were lucky to find the Shambhala. After binding the worst of their wounds, they lost consciousness.

“When they finally awoke, they saw something that they had never expected. The Shambhala was home to a small tribe of naiads. Water nymphs,” he clarified at seeing Richter’s lack of comprehension.

“Oh!” Richter exclaimed. Nymph was a word that he recognized. He doubted there was any red-blooded male, or too many geek females, that hadn’t had a wistful daydream about finding a wood nymph that they could “comfort.”

Ran’dolphinius’ bluish lips pulled back in a faint smile and Richter caught a glimpse of his sharpened teeth. The chaos seed pulled back slightly and an inch of the blade he still clenched cleared the scabbard before he could stop himself. Even with Randy’s new, somewhat alien visage, he had started to relax. Those teeth weren’t made for eating corn though. They were made to rend flesh.

Seeing Richter’s reaction, the mirth left the half-undine’s face. He continued in a smooth and level voice, “One of the King’s party members was so surprised that, despite being in a Shambhala, he almost attacked when the naiad touched his face. Luckily for him, he forestalled his sword strike. It didn’t take long before all the Adventurers were enjoying the comforts of the naiad’s tender mercies. If the King had been content to enjoy himself with his men then I would most likely never have been born, but his arrogance was as legendary as his strength.

“The story goes that he strode out into the waters and called for the queen naiad to come and slake his “thirst.” Some versions of the telling even state that he dipped his manhood into the waters and shouted, ‘I am a grower

and a shower! The coldness of these waters cannot shrink my spear!”

Ran’dolphinius shook his head with a faint smile, “That may have been simple hyperbole, Lord Richter, but what is known is that something heard his boastful call and decided to teach a painful lesson to my arrogant father.”

“I thought you said no one could harm anyone else in a Shambhala?”

Richer interrupted.

“There are more ways to enact revenge than simply harming someone, Lord Richter. At times, all that is required is to give them what they ask for. There was no queen naiad, but the Dungeon had evolved to the point that each Power could manifest an Avatar, a physical embodiment of a Basic Element. In this case, the Water ley line appeared as a powerful undine. The elemental took the form of a beautiful, winged naiad and she lay with the King, fulfilling his every desire.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of a revenge,” Richter said.

“Ah,” Ran’dolphinius replied with the tone of a teacher. His face may have changed, but his voice was still pure aristocrat, “so others have also thought. You must remember, however, that the powers of an undine lie in illusion and misdirection. She enchanted the men of the party so that a single night of pleasure actually lasted an entire month. It is true that no harm can be perpetrated within a Shambhala, but such was the beauty of the naiads that

when the undine asked each man a simple question, “Can we please you forever?” they all acceded. Thrice she asked each of them, and thrice they agreed. As they stayed under the undine’s power of their own free will, the elemental’s spell did not break the law of Labyrinth. I believe you may have already learned this lesson, but I shall repeat it nonetheless. In The Land, your words have power. This is doubly true if said to a woman.”

Richter nodded. He had indeed learned that lesson. And the second part about women was a lesson he’d learned too many times while still on Earth.

“The King’s party might have stayed there until they died, trapped in pleasure. Fortunately, as arrogant as the King was, he also engendered great loyalty. A cadre of Adventurers loyal to him, Specialists all, fought through the Dungeon. They searched for weeks and finally found their liege. Once they entered the Shambhala, the enchantment was broken. The naiads left the embrace of their lovers and dove back into the pool, disappearing forever.

“The cries of pleasure that had been echoing through the Shambhala turned to wails of sorrow and anger. Two of the King’s party had died from neglect while under the Undine’s enchantment. They had sought pleasure above even their own need to eat and drink. The others were malnourished. Despite their anger and weakness, it is said they all still reached towards their disappearing lovers. One drowned himself in a river weeks later in the vain

hope he might find his lost love. It was the King who suffered most though,” Ran’dolphinius finished. Richter couldn’t help but notice that a note of bitterness had worked its way into the round pear-shaped tones of the man’s voice.

“The undine revealed her true form a moment before leaving the King. What had been a beautiful woman of perfect proportions became a scaled humanoid with sharp teeth and a fish-like appearance. She spoke to him one final time as the naiads’ fled, ‘Honor your Vow.’ Then her body dissolved into water, and she was gone.

“Time passed, and the event was mostly forgotten. Death was a common occurrence in the Labyrinth, after all. Also, the court quickly learned not to discuss the undine, at least not within earshot of the king or his Adventurers. One beheading was all that was required to teach that particular lesson.

“One year later, however, as the King was preparing to enter the Dungeon, a hooded figure blocked his path. His fellow Adventurers moved to attack, but the figure threw back her hood. When the King saw that it was the undine, he stayed the attack. One of my father’s close friends said that he saw the pain of lost love on the King’s face, though he was never so foolish as to broach the topic directly.

“In the undine’s arms was a small bundle. She called out to the King using the same words she’d used as a farewell a year before, ‘Honor your Vow.’

“Now, the King may have forbidden open talk of the events at the Shambhala due to embarrassment, but he was not so foolish as to pretend it had not happened. He had spoken to his greatest advisors about what he could remember and they, in turn, had searched the palace records for any hint of something similar occurring in the past. The Scholars he had employed had argued as their Profession is wont to do, but one had a theory that the Undine was actually an Avatar of the Dungeon. As soon as the King had heard that, he’d known in his heart it was the truth.”

The Spy’s voice became lecture-y again, “A Vow is never to be taken lightly, much less the Vow of a King. Breaking such a promise could have repercussions not just for him, but for the entire kingdom. A Vow to the manifestation of a Place of Power, however, was another thing entirely. When it was factored in that his Dungeon was linked to the Vow as well... the Scholars had no disagreement on this particular point. The King could not even consider breaking such an oath. This was the reason the King gave for stopping his Adventurers from killing the undine, though again, his friend tells a different story.

“I was told that the undine smiled as she walked closer and then

pronounced, 'I see you have learned some small amount of wisdom since our time together.' Then she handed him the bundle and made him repeat that he would honor the Vow. And," Ran'dolphinius said, placing one hand on his chest, "he did."

"You were the baby," Richter said, nodding as he digested the story. Only silence surrounded them. He wasn't exactly sure how he felt about the tale, but he was happy he was finally getting to the truth. As he thought about the story, a question occurred to him, "If it was the current King's grandfather that sired you, how old are you?"

"I will celebrate my one hundred and ninth year come Sanren, my lord. Now, if I may, I have a question for you."

The two men made eye contact and Ran'dolphinius slowly stood. Richter matched him, at long last letting go of the dagger still under his pillow. It wasn't that he doubted the deadliness of the Spy, but he just didn't believe the man would attack him. Whatever else Randy was, he was a man of honor.

As they stood to their full heights, Richter received another small surprise. The chamberlain had always been a bit taller than him, but with the glamour fallen away, the chaos seed now overtopped him by at least four inches. Somehow, that didn't take away from the power or strength that the

half-undine exuded though.

Slowly, so that he didn't startle Richter, the chamberlain took his pen and drew the point across the surface of his palm. Though his skin had a blue undertone, the blood welling was as dark red as any human's. The metal nib sliced through the flesh as easily as a scalpel and Richter realized anew just how precarious his position would be if the Spy chose to attack him. Ran'dolphinius turned his hand to the side, and the blood began to fall in a slow *pat, pat, pat* onto the stone of the floor.

"Twice before I have made a Blood Oath," Ran'dolphinius pronounced. "Once, to my father, I swore to never to sit upon the throne of Yves and to forever serve his bloodline. I did so faithfully until the new King cast me from his service when he learned of my true lineage. With my father's flesh now turned to dust, I hold that Oath fulfilled. My second Oath I cannot share with you, even if it means you cast me from your side. I would never have shared so much with you if I did not truly trust you, my lord. Even now, I cannot share that one truth. And yet despite the fact that you may kill or exile me, my third Oath is this."

Ran'dolphinius knelt down and lay the palm of his bleeding hand flat on the stone, "I, Ran'dolphinius, swear by my blood to the four Powers embodied in this stone and to the Universe itself that all I have said this night is true. I further swear that all I will say for the rest of this night will be

true.” He looked up and made eye contact with Richter, “I believe in you. You have come far in the months that I have known you. Your decisions have both saved and cost lives, and each has weighed upon you. I have seen you evolve into a true ruler, and know that you base your leadership not just upon the might of your blade or magic, but rather your ideals. Acceptance for all, increasing the power and level of those around you, and protecting those too weak to protect themselves...”

A slight sheen of moisture began to cover Ran’dolphinius’ eyes as he continued to stare at the chaos seed. His voice took on the slight echo of Power that occurred when the Universe recognized and held you to the words you would speak, “I *believe* in you, my lord. Know that as I make this Oath. By the power of my true name, by the lineage of my father King Phillipe III and my mother the Avatar Undine, I formally swear allegiance and loyalty to you, my Lord Richter. From now, unto my very death, I will protect you and your interests, to the best of my ability and without deceit. Will you have me?”

The air stilled and a feeling of great weight settled upon Richter. The eye of the Universe looked down upon him and the strings of fate drew taut as they awaited his decision. A pattern of importance would be woven into the skein of history tonight, and the tapestry would change based on his response.

Richter felt the import and yet still took his time to think. The Spy had been right, he *had* learned the importance of words in The Land, and he would not rush judgement in such an important moment. On the one hand, Ran'dolphinius had deceived him. The man wasn't even human, and Undines weren't even a race he was familiar with. A half-elf, or even a half-orc, wouldn't be a person he would dismiss out of hand. But what if Randolphus - Ran'dolphinius, Richter corrected himself again - thought in an alien way because he was half-elemental? Did that make him half-monster?

Perhaps even more troubling was the second Oath that the chamberlain couldn't tell him about. It was more than just a small cause for concern. What if that Oath was something horrible like killing all humans? What if it was to infiltrate other villages and kingdoms, being loyal until he could sell them out to Yves? The man was a damn Spy, after all. Not trusting him was kind of in the name.

It was insane to Richter to even think about the fact that the word "Spy" wasn't just a job description. Ran'dolphinius wasn't just someone who relayed information. The fucking Universe had assigned him that Specialty! What did that say about him as a person? What did that say about the man's soul?

Part of Richter itched to attack, if only because it was an easy and definitive option. His nerves were still raw from a day of battle. The short

sleep had taken the edge off, but even with his Belt of Sustenance, he needed more rest. Yes, a part of Richter just wanted to take a potentially troubling piece off the chessboard. That made him think about how he really should invent chess in The Land. It wasn't just a relaxing game, it was a great way to...

The chaos seed shook his head. He was more tired than he thought if his mind could wander like that. Then his eyes narrowed. Or had he just gone off on a tangent because of some weird Spy Talent that the chamberlain had purchased? Was he being manipulated? Was his thinking about being manipulated a manipulation itself, aimed at keeping him off balance? Richter stared hard at Ran'dolphinius, then released his breath in a huff. He could go down that rabbit hole forever and keep falling. No, he had to focus on what he knew.

What he knew was that Ran'dolphinius had in all likelihood saved lives in the village with his contributions. The chamberlain had made sure that hundreds of people had been fed, clothed and sheltered for months. He had been a blessing to the Mist Village.

There was also the point that Richter wouldn't even be facing this choice if Ran'dolphinius hadn't decided to be honest with him. The man had shown him trust. It might just be the Universe exerting its hidden rules, forcing the Spy to come clean since their official relationship had improved

from *Admiring* to *Trusting*. Even if that was true though, it didn't mean that Randy's regret for deceiving him wasn't real. On the contrary, it might just ensure that the man was telling the truth.

Of course, the most important thing was the Blood Oath. Richter had made one himself, and the consequences for failure were severe. His Oath hadn't even involved calling on the Universe or a Place of Power. Words had power. With what Ran'dolphinius had just promised, Richter couldn't even imagine what the consequences of breaking such an Oath would be...

He came to a decision.

"Stand," Richter commanded.

Ran'dolphinius did as he was told. Standing now, the blood from his hand continued to fall to the floor, *pat, pat, pat*.

"Swear that your Oath will last until I release you from it," Richter told him. "Swear that even if I die and never return, you will hold to your pledge."

"I do so swear," the chamberlain intoned.

"Swear that you will give me honest counsel and that you will support me to the fullest of your abilities, skills, Talents, and capabilities."

Ran'dolphinius did not hesitate, "I do so swear."

The already oppressive weight in the room increased. Richter spoke a final time, “Swear that you will hold your Oath to me with the same respect and importance as any other Oath, past or present. Swear that you will not take any action to compromise me, my village, or my interests even if it conflicts with other Oaths before you speak to me and tell me why.”

Ran’dolphinius’ eyes widened, and for the first time, Richter saw him look uncomfortable. This was the main point. The chaos seed wouldn’t force a man he trusted and respected to betray his values or conscience. Richter also couldn’t let such considerations compromise his own goals and needs though. He was basically asking Ran’dolphinius to confront him before the man did something Richter might object to. The chamberlain would have to look him in the eye and admit he was about to betray him. It was entirely possible that only one of them would walk away from that conversation.

The blood continued to fall, *pat, pit, pat*.

The chamberlain’s discomfort lasted but a moment before he answered, slowly and deliberately, “I do so swear.”

Richter spoke a word of Power and a golden radiance surrounded his hand. He reached out and clasped Ran’dolphinius’ bloody palm, healing the wound. The chaos seed maintained his grip and rested his other hand upon

his chamberlain's shoulder. "I accept your Oath of Blood and fealty, and swear to honor your pledge with the same gravity in which it was given."

The still moment passed and the Universe moved its gaze beyond the two men. Ran'dolphinius' face took on a look of pleased relief, and Richter's own face broke into an involuntary grin. Long ago he had decided that when he was faced with an impossible choice, when the futures of all paths were equally shadowed, when the countless possibilities of either choice either balanced out or were hopelessly confusing, that he would make a decision based on what he hoped to be true, rather than by what he feared to be true. It was possible that this could be a mistake, but it was his choice, and that was what mattered.

Besides, The Land itself seemed to give its approval of his decision.

Ran'dolphinius the Half-Undine has become your Companion. Companions will stay with you only as long as your goals align.

The glow faded from Richter's hand and the two men stood there, blood laying between them, united in purpose.

CHAPTER 12 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



With Randy a Companion, Richter now had access to his full status page. What he saw raised even more questions.

Name: Ran'dolphinius	Profession: Rogue	Level: 47, 60%
Race: Half-Human/Half-Undine	Specialty: Spy Focus: Counterintelligence	Languages: Common, Elvish, Dwarvish, Gnomish, Spritespeak, Goblin, Trollish, Orcish, ...
Reputation: Lvl 3 "You seem like someone worthy of my attention."	Age: 109	Alignment: Chaotic (1) Evil (1)
STATS		
Health: 581	Mana: 412	Stamina: 353
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 29	Agility: 54	Dexterity: 52
Constitution: 43	Endurance: 32	Intelligence: 36
Wisdom: 57	Charisma: 59	Luck: 57
RESISTANCE	SPELL POWER	WEAKNESS
Water: +71%	Water: +36%	Fire: 34%
SKILLS		
...		

ABILITIES

Pleasing Visage: Those that look upon you will find you trustworthy and attractive

Yvesian Royal: A member of the Royal Family of Yves

Undine's Deception: Can disguise your intrinsic self and become another persona. New persona must have abilities and skills weaker than your true self. You will only have access to the capabilities of this new persona.

QUALITIES

Ruthless II: Up to +10% chance of critical hit when using Small Blades. Up to +50% Critical Damage. Aura of Menace: Enemies may *Fear* you. +1 Evil Alignment

Loyal III: Your deeds have proven you to be trustworthy. People are 75% more likely to believe you. +750% to negative consequences of breaking a Vow, Oath or other binding geas

Obsessed IV: Your dogged obsession with an Oath has led to many sacrifices, but has also strengthened your will. +40% to Willpower and resistance to mental or emotional control

MARKS

Adventurer

Obscured Vision

Dark Deeds

Richter wasn't even sure where to start. The status page was entirely too massive at first, mostly thanks to the listing of the man's skills.

Apparently, a century was enough time to amass an insane amount of skills.

Many of them were still *novice* rank, but it was still an insane amount. A mental tweak was all it took to minimize them and Richter promised himself he'd go through them later. One that did pop out to him though was that the

Spy was level forty-one in Administration, which could definitely come in handy. With the page more manageable now, he carefully read through the prompts three times. Ran'dolphinius must have known that his status screen was now available as he had access to Richter's as well, but he just remained still. Waiting.

The first thing that bothered Richter and that he felt needed to be addressed was that the guy was literally "Evil"! He felt a bit better when he saw that the negative alignment was due to a Quality Randy had acquired. Then again, that Quality was "ruthless." Nope, Richter corrected himself. "Ruthless *two*!" When he asked the Spy how he felt about the alignment, the response was simple.

The concept of good and evil had come to Richter's mind many times since being in The Land. He had met slavers, thieves, and murderers. On Earth, he would have had no problem labeling them as evil.

Richter wasn't one to shy away from harsh truths, however. His use of the spell *Charm* made others into slaves of a sort. He had stolen, and in just six months, he had already killed hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. Many with the blade and in battle, but when the situation had called for it, he had also killed in cold blood.

His closest allies, the sprites, were also almost uniformly positive

alignment, or what was now being called “good.” He knew for a fact though, that the sprites had no problem killing as well. Sprites had a standing shoot-to-kill order for any other species they found in their territory. Their reasoning was that they were protecting the forest. It might have been true, but the sprites were also just classically xenophobic. Did that make them evil? Richter knew in his heart that it didn’t, but he also wouldn’t say they were exactly good, either. Since coming to The Land his definitions of good and evil had become decidedly more... accommodating.

“My actions have earned me my Qualities and my alignment. I cannot say that it is not a fair assessment. I only ask that you judge me based on my entire status screen as well as my actions.”

That was a fair request, Richter decided. The whole topic of good vs evil had bothered him since coming to The Land. His best friend had a good alignment several times over, but he’d still let Richter be eaten alive while he’d just watched. The sprites actually had a long history of xenophobic killings. There was definitely an argument to be made that such actions could be “evil,” though the other argument could also be made that in a world of goblins and monsters it was for the common “good” that a people protect their borders. Richter personally believed in the benefits of a diverse society, but that was him.

At the end of the day, he realized that he still wasn’t sure exactly what

good or evil meant. The best definition he'd come up with dealt with intent and consideration. If you took the needs of others into account when you took an action, then you were good. If you only thought about yourself, then you were evil. Of course, the holes in that logic were big enough for a hippo in a hummer to drive through, but it was better than nothing. The main fear that Richter had was that the terms might not be just descriptive. What if someone with an *evil* alignment had to do horrible and selfish acts because the mechanics of The Land itself forced them to do so?

Philosophers had been tackling this particular question since consciousness had evolved on Earth and hadn't made any headway. Richter was willing to bet it was the same in The Land, and the only ones who felt they had a definitive answer were normally perpetrators of the worst acts imaginable. Any action, no matter how heinous, could be justified if you had a "righteous" cause to drive you forward and you were acting in the "common" good.

It wasn't like alignment was the only thing on Randy's status sheet anyway. The man had literally been commended by the Universe for his loyalty three times. It didn't mean the man couldn't ever break his word, but there was no ambiguity about the increased penalty if he were to do so. Considering everything the Spy had sworn on when making his Blood Oath, if he ever broke trust with Richter, he'd be in a world of shit. In fact,

considering there was a 750% increase in penalties, the guy might actually get Walter Pecked. Instead of gallons of marshmallow dropping from the sky though, it might literally be a god-sized dollop of toxic shit. When you looked at it that way, Richter had more reason to trust Randy than almost anyone else.

The Pleasing Visage ability made him a bit uncomfortable as well. It seemed that the man was intrinsically more likely to make others trust him. An extremely useful skill for a Spy, Richter supposed, but how could he be sure about his own choices? It all came back down to the Blood Oath and the fact that Richter had already decided to trust him. Either he was in or he was out.

He was in.

Richter waved the Spy back down into his seat. He decided that if he wished for the two of them to trust each other, then he needed to show trust in turn. Now that they were Companions, Richter felt comfortable sharing a few facts he hadn't disclosed yet.

"*You* ushered in the New Age?" the chamberlain exclaimed in disbelief.

Richter nodded and told him about the Chaotic Shard, the release of energy and how it had triggered the end of the Epoch of Banished Gods and

the start of the Age of Chaos.

“What exactly did you see here in the village when the new Age began?” Richter asked.

The chamberlain shook his head as if he still couldn’t believe what he had seen, “The sky rippled, like a pond struck with a stone, only the stone was the size of a moon. The sun had risen, but the blue disappeared and nothing was between me and the starry cosmos. Then a new sky reappeared, but it was filled with green clouds and floating islands the size of cities. A few seconds later, another sky appeared, and then another. The shifts began to occur faster and faster until the stars appeared again. They raced across the sky as if a thousand years had passed in a moment. Slowly, they stilled again, and I could see the original stars once more. The sky rippled one last time, and the blue of mid-morning reappeared.”

“Was there anything else?” Richter asked. He was kinda pissed that he had missed such an awesome show. He had been stuck underground when the New Age began and it seemed a bit unfair that he had missed the light show when he was the reason it had happened. He huffed in irritation. Whatever.

Ran’dolphinius thought for a moment before speaking, “I was only able to see our original sky for a moment before the blue of day returned, but

I thought I saw a few more stars than there should have been. As I said, however, it was for just a moment. I could have been mistaken. I checked once night fell and did not see any extra stars then.”

Richter filed that information away and just kept on asking questions. In addition to the revelations already shared about his chamberlain’s past, there were other, more welcome surprises.

“I have gained many skills over my century of life, Lord Richter. Now that we are Companions, I am sure that you can see them. I will be happy to share them with you as well as my knowledge. You would most likely be interested in my three masteries first. I am a master of Water Magic, Small Blades, and Stealth.”

“A *master*?” Richter asked, his eyes widening. “That means you can teach magic?”

“I was hoping that you would be interested, my lord. By your leave?” Ran’dolphinius raised both hands.

The chaos seed nodded eagerly and the chamberlain placed one hand on Richter’s head and the other one on his chest. A cool, crisp feeling spread through his body and with it came knowledge. His eyes widened and he *knew*!

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Weak Find Water**. Casting

this spell allows you to sense sources of water within 100 feet of your location. This is a spell of Water Magic, level 1. Cost: 17 mana.

Duration: 10 min. Range: 100 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Summon Weak Aether Carp**. This spell summons a level four magical fish to serve you. This is a spell of Water Magic, level 5. Cost: 42 mana. Duration: 12 min. Range: 7 feet. Cast Time: 3 seconds. Cooldown: 43 minutes.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Teatro's Weak Water Casting**. This spell created by the Water wizard Teatro allows you to cast *Novice* rank Water, Life and Dark spells while underwater. This is a spell of Water Magic, level 4. Cost: 65 mana. Duration: 2 hours. Range: Self. Cast Time: 4 seconds. Cooldown: 1 day.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Weak Purify Drink**. This spell will clear a cup, flask, skin or other small holding container of any weak impurities, poisons or diseases. This is a spell of Water Magic, level

3. Cost: 16 mana. Duration: Instant. Range: 4 feet. Cast Time: 2 seconds. Cooldown: N/A.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Weak Water Damage**. This spell will add +1 Water damage to any weapon. Provides +1% chance to afflict a struck enemy with *Weak Slow*, decreasing their movement and attack speed by 10%. This is a spell of Water Magic, level 3. Cost: 26 mana. Duration: 22 minutes. Range: 5 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: 27 minutes.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Weak Swift Swim**. This spell increases your swimming speed by 50%. This is a spell of Water Magic, level 4. Cost: 28 mana. Duration: 8 minutes. Range: Touch. Cast Time: 1 seconds. Cooldown: 21 minutes.

Richter fell to the ground gasping. Arcane equations and calculations spun through his mind as his lungs seized. His neurons screamed as they realigned to accommodate so much new information. Spell theory that had taken months, years or lifetimes to create became as familiar to him as tying

his shoes. Ran'dolphinius reached down to help him up, "Are you alright, my lord?"

"Yeah," Richter replied. "That just always feels like a kick to the mind nuts."

The chamberlain blinked once or twice before a small smile stole across his face, "Yes, my lord. It can be. Still, it is impressive that you can retain so many spells at such a low Water magic skill level."

A flash of adrenaline shot through Richter's body, "What do you mean 'impressive'?"

"Merely that I did not believe you would be able to absorb all six spells. I thought perhaps three, maybe four, but learning all six is quite a feat. It speaks well for your future growth as an aquamancer."

Richter's head still ached and it put him a bit on edge, "Why wouldn't I be able to absorb all the spells at once? What is it I don't know?"

Ran'dolphinius blinked twice, then said carefully, "You do know that there is a limit on the number of spells that one can learn, do you not, my lord?"

"News to me," Richter said sitting back down on the bed. His temples were throbbing!

Alma had been looking worriedly at her master, but once he was off

the floor, she relaxed. Before Ran'dolphinius had bent the knee, she had been ready to attack the man if needed. She had planned on unleashing a *Psi Blast* followed by a quick casting of *Weak Lightning Bolt*. Then she would have physically attacked and tried to use her psi poison on the chamberlain. She was smart enough to understand how tense the situation had been. Even though she'd liked the chamberlain before, if he had posed a risk to her master, he would already be dead. She knew that as surely as she knew scale scratches were heaven. Now that the moment had passed, the dragonling found she was glad an attack hadn't been necessary. Not because she was afraid of violence. Fresh blood was even better than scale scratches, but she *had* always liked the chamberlain.

Both men were unaware of the thoughts passing unseen behind Alma's draconian eyes. Instead, the chamberlain was pondering what Richter had just said. His liege had made the comment in an offhand fashion, but he'd seen him use magic from all eight Basic Elements and some Deeper Magic. Was it possible that Richter really didn't have a limit to the spells he could know at one time?

Ran'dolphinius licked his lips as if tasting the idea. That was more than a little bit unnerving for Richter because it once again revealed the sharpness of the half-undine's teeth. "I do not have a *rare* skill like your Analyze, my lord, but my Profession allows me a Talent to know what skills

you possess and what their levels are. I know, for instance, that your highest-level magic skill is Air. It is level fifteen and is followed by Fire at level twelve, then Life and Earth magic which are both level eleven. Your Water Magic, in contrast, is only level five. What I do not know is how many spells you possess in total, my lord. Would you mind telling me?”

Richter looked at the man and considered the request. He didn’t really see a reason not to share. He was already trusting Randy with his life and his training, after all. It was just against his nature to share personal information unless absolutely necessary. He pushed his suspicion back down and decided to answer, but he also decided against providing the names of every spell.

He accessed his spell lists and began to count.

AIR MAGIC		
Name	Level	Effect
Weak Lightning Bolt	12	Casts a lightning bolt from your hand. Damage: 15-20. Chance to stun your target for 1-2 seconds.
Weak Aided Flight	1	Fires Projectiles 10% faster than normal

Weak Air Push	1	Summons a column of air ten feet in front of you, one foot in diameter. Does no real damage, but will knock enemies back and possibly prone.
Weak Errant Wind	1	Increases dodge of your party to projectiles by 10%. Only works outside.
Glitterdust	1	Creates a 5x5-foot area of shining, sharp dust. Reveals hidden creatures and objects caught in the AoE. Chance to blind creatures susceptible to such attacks.
Weak Haste	1	Increases movement and attack speed by 10%
Gentle Rain	1	Summons a small rainstorm

EARTH MAGIC		
Name	Level	Effect
Weak Static Earth Shield	10	Creates a magical sphere around you comprised of Earth magic. The shield has 200 HPs. Shield defense strength +5 (+10 vs Air). Ineffective against Earth attacks. Only Earth-based spells

		<p>may leave the boundaries of the shield.</p> <p>Physically touching your own shield will dispel it.</p>
Summon Minor Chokespore Arachnid	9	Summons a level 12 Chokespore Arachnid
Minor Chitin Carapace	9	<p>Covers the target in a flexible carapace.</p> <p>Increases natural armor by +3.</p>
Weak Sonic Wail	6	Creates a sound attack using your voice. All within the cone-shaped AoE suffer damage and risk being deafened.
Summon Weak Saproling	6	Summons a level 5 forest elemental to do your bidding
Weak Paralysis Beam	5	Fires a beam that will lock the target's body into position
Weak Acid Sphere	5	Creates a ball of acid that can be thrown at your target. Damage: 4-6 per second.
Weak Rending	4	Summons invisible claws to attack all targets

Talons		within a 10-foot AoE
Summon Insects	1	Summons a host of stinging and biting insects in a 10-foot-wide circle. Causes minimal damage, but impedes concentration.
Weak Thorns Underfoot	1	Creates a field of thorns in a 30x30-yard area. Most likely would not be noticed by anyone wearing stout boots, but the spell can cause extreme discomfort and minor damage to anyone barefoot or to animals.
Grease	1	Creates a slick in a 10x10-foot area, greatly increasing chance of anyone in the area falling down
Weak Barkskin	1	Increases natural armor by +2

FIRE		
Name	Level	Effect
Weak Fireball	12	Fires a ball of flame that detonates upon impact.

		Flames are spread out from this area, dousing anyone within a ten-meter radius in fire. Chance to cause <i>Burn</i> . Damage: 20-25.
Weak Flame	1	Shoots a weak gout of flame from your hand. Chance to cause <i>Burn</i> . 3-5 Damage per second.

WATER		
Name	Level	Effect
Summon Weak Aether Carp	5	Summons a five-foot magical fish to serve you
Teatro's Weak Water Casting	4	Allows you to cast <i>Novice</i> ranked Water, Life and Dark spells underwater.
Weak Swift Swim	4	Increases your swimming speed by 50%
Weak Purify Drink	3	Clears a cup, flask, skin or other small holding container of any weak impurities, poisons or diseases
Weak Water	3	Adds +1 damage to any weapon. Provides 1%

Damage		chance to afflict a struck enemy with <i>Weak Slow</i> , decreasing their movement and attack speed by 10%.
Weak Slow	1	Slows the target by 10%
Weak Ice Dagger	1	Throws a dagger made of ice at your target. Damage: 5-6
Weak Find Water	1	Allows you to sense sources of water within 100 feet of your location

LIFE		
Name	Level	Effect
Summon Weak Gold Fox	10	Summons a magical fox that will heal you and allies for one hundred points each. The fox may heal five times before disappearing.
Weak Static Life Shield	10	Creates a magical sphere around you comprised of Life magic. The shield has 100 HPs. Shield defense strength +3 (+6 vs Death). Ineffective against Life attacks. Only Life-based spells may

		leave the boundaries of the shield. Physically touching your own shield will dispel it.
Minor Slow Heal	9	Restores 90 missing health over 60 seconds
Weak Mend Bone	8	Fixes small uncomplicated breaks in bone. Must be targeted to each fracture.
Weak Detect Hostile Intent	8	Reveals if any creatures within ten yards have an active deadly intent towards you
Summon Weak Life Wisp	6	Summons an entity comprised of Life magic. Will float in the area and restore a total of 100 health to you or one of your allies.
Weak Life Armor	5	Increases Defense of all armor pieces by +1 (+2 vs. Death)
Weak Courage	4	Improves your Fighting Spirit by +50
Weak Life Bolt	4	Fires a bolt of concentrated Life energy. Damage: 5-10 (10-20 vs Death)
Weak Banish Undead	3	Dissipates the energy allowing a Death creature to exist in this plane unless target resists

Weak Life Aura	3	Surrounds the caster's body with a golden shield of pure Life energy. Any nearby death, dead or undead creatures will be discomforted. Any actual contact with the shield will cause damage to the undead.
Weak Stabilize	3	Decreases the rate of bleeding and total bleeding time if a target is stricken with a 'Bleeding' status.
Soul Trap	1	Binds the soul of the target to this plane, preventing passage to the beyond at time of death. They will instead be pulled into any nearby empty soul stone of appropriate size.
Weak Slow Heal	1	Restores 30 missing health over 60 seconds
Weak Cure Disease	1	Cures most <i>weak</i> diseases
Weak Cure Poison	1	Removes most <i>weak</i> poison effects
Call Weak	1	Calls any non-sapient creature of 'Small' size (2-

Small Creature		4 ft long) in the immediate area to the caster. Creature will then follow simple commands.
Weak Charm	1	Convinces an enemy 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.
Weak Life Beacon	1	Shoots a golden flare high into the air. Any creatures within one mile that have a relationship to you of friendly or above will be compelled to come to your aid.
Summon Weak Luminous Butterflies	1	Summons a small number of glowing butterflies. Any creature of positive alignment who catches one of these butterflies will have a boost to their stamina for one day. Total boost equal to 1% per number of alignment. Only one butterfly may affect each individual.
Virol's Blessing	1	Increases the yield and potency of a 20x20-yard area of plants by 5%. Successive casts of this spell create a cumulative effect for a max of

		100%.
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DEATH MAGIC		
Name	Level	Effect
Summon Weak Bile Rats	1	Summons a small nest of bile rats. The bites of these creatures can cause nausea.

LIGHT MAGIC		
Name	Level	Effect
Create Soul Stone (Luminous)	15	Creates soul stones up to <i>Luminous</i> level
Weak Mirror Image	7	Summons a duplicate image of yourself to a nearby location. Image will duplicate your actions with small variations to take terrain into account. Number of images is determined by (1+ Light Magic/5). Maximum 5 images.

Create Soul Stone (Common)	5	Creates soul stones up to Common level
Weak Magic Missiles	5	Produces colorful balls of magical force that fly unerringly towards the enemy. Damage: 4-5 point of Magical Force per ball. Each sphere can be directed towards different enemies. Number of missiles is determined by $(1 + \text{Light Magic}/5)$. Maximum 7 missiles.
Far Light	1	Creates a ball of white light that can be fixed to a distant surface
Simple Light	1	Creates a ball of white light that will hover above your head and move with you
Mirror	1	Creates a 6x3-foot insubstantial reflective surface

DARK MAGIC

Name	Level	Effect
Weak Dark	4	Fires a bolt of concentrated Dark energy at your

Bolts		target. Damage: 7-9. For every three skill levels the caster has in Dark magic, the spell will fire another bolt. Maximum 10 bolts.
Troubled Sleep	3	Places your target in a restless sleep in which he will be plagued by nightmares until awakening. Any attack or hostile action taken against target will awaken them. AoE five feet.
Flood of Darkness	3	Blankets an area 25 yards around you in darkness. Effect banished by direct sunlight. Blocks all light-based sight.
Darkvision	2	Provides Darkvision for 25 yards
Weak Cloying Darkness	2	Casts a cone of thickened darkness from your hand. Movement and Attack speed of targets decreased by 20%. All in AoE will suffer from spell. Will not work in direct sunlight.
Night Vision	1	Illuminates low-light areas

BLOOD MAGIC

Name	Level	Effect
Blood Mana	10	Allows caster to replenish and increase their mana pool from fresh blood. Can absorb 1 mana/Blood Magic skill level from each blood source. Maximum mana from each blood source is determined by total health of target/10
Weak Vitality Puppet	10	Allows you to take complete control over one other creature that has blood
Tame	1	<p>Bends the will of a creature to your own.</p> <p>Creature level must be less than or equal to your rank in the skill: Beast Bonding. At the rank of Novice, you may attempt to tame ‘weak’ level souls and may use the spell once per day. If you tame the same creature for a required number of days in a row, then it will be loyal to you till death. As a novice in Beast Bonding, the required time is six days for every level of the creature you have tamed. Betray the sacred trust with your bonded beast to your</p>

		peril!
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SPIRIT MAGIC		
Name	Level	Effect
Weak Aura Lance	1	Fires a blast of spiritual energy at your target. Does no physical damage, but causes disruption of the target's aura. Reduces resistance to all spell types.

CHAOS MAGIC		
Name	Level	Effect
Akaton Evolution	1	Triggers the evolution of a summoned creature or pet. In the case of summoned creatures, it will also lengthen the spell duration of your summoning by 50%. This spell will not work on sapient beings.

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UNALIGNED MAGIC

Name	Level	Effect
Manifest Mana	1	<p>This spell has no specific affinity for any type of magic. Instead, the power and effects of this spell are determined by the skill level of Mana Manipulation. Successful casting of this spell makes your mana tangible in the physical world.</p> <p>At skill level one the cost is 100 mana. If thrown at an attacker, will cause 1 point of magical force damage.</p>

SETTLEMENT MAGIC

(Must be cast within the domain of the Mist Village)

Name	Level	Effect
Summon Mist Worker	1	<p>Summons a level 1 Mist Worker. This creature is able to perform simple tasks of menial labor.</p> <p>The mist-like properties of your constructs</p>

		halve all physical damage.
Summon Mist Light	1	Summons a ball of glowing grey energy that can adhere to any surface or hang in midair
Dungeon Transport	1	Instantly transports yourself and any creatures within five yards to any accessed Node in the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos. Must be cast within the domain of the village.

Richter did a final tally of his spells, overwhelmed by the number despite himself, “Seventy-two.”

“Seventy-two!” Ran’dolphinius exclaimed. The reserve he normally wore with unthinking grace disappeared, and all that remained was astonishment. “Even if they were all low-level spells of the Basic Elements, that is unheard of for one of your skill level!”

Richter wasn’t sure how he should feel about that. He kept watching Ran’dolphinius, who was now muttering to himself. One phrase the chaos seed heard clearly was, “... would not even need a grimoire. ... could his ability truly...”

This went on for a full three minutes. He finally looked back at

Richter, who was staring at him bemusedly at this point. “I apologize, my lord, but I do not think you understand how shocking this is. It is easy to forget there is much you do not know when faced with the power you wield. I will attempt to explain. One of the primary reasons magi invest heavily into Intelligence and Wisdom is to increase the number of spells they can learn. Other factors affect spell limit as well, such as skill affinity, skill level in various schools of magic, race and several others. Increasing Intelligence and Wisdom, however, is the easiest way to ensure a higher spell limit.”

“How many spells did you think I would be able to know?”

Ran’dolphinius shrugged, “As I said, my lord, there are many factors that influence that. My mixed parentage gave me an extremely high spell limit for Water magic, even before I became a *master* in the skill. The fact that you know multiple types of magic would increase your spell limit as well. For a normal *novice* in a Basic Element, however, I would expect them to know no more than five to ten spells. That is why almost every battle mage must rely upon wands, staves or grimoires.”

The chamberlain paused for a moment before continuing, “The spell limit is one of the reasons magi are vulnerable. It is not just a lack of mana that can spell death for a caster, it is knowing a finite number of spells. It is also why magi typically specialize not only in a certain branch of magic, but also in specific spell schools. Battlemages do not learn domestic or

agricultural magic, for instance.”

“Why haven’t I ever heard about this before?” Richter asked. “Why don’t I ever have a problem learning spells?”

Ran’dolphinius shook his head slowly, “I do not know for certain, but I would guess it is your Limitless ability.”

Richter stared at him. When he had been transported to The Land, the creature he had first met, Xuetrix, had told him to be wary of telling other people about his Limitless ability. Specifically, the imp had said there were those that would neutralize him now out of fear of what he would become. Ran’dolphinius was no fool though, and they were Companions now so the man already had access to his status page. He just nodded slowly.

The Spy whistled softly, before saying, “You could very well become the most powerful being in The Land. I advise you to tell no one else about your ability, my lord. Many will consider you a threat and might destroy you before you reach your potential.”

Déjà vu much, Richter thought to himself. He just nodded again though and thought about the new info. If the man was right that a spell limit was partially based on magical affinity, and his affinity was infinite, then it made sense. It also meant he might have a real edge over other casters. That sounded more than alright to him! Richter asked another question. “If you

didn't think I would be able to learn all the spells, then why did you teach them to me?"

"That is just a common technique to test new magical students," Ran'dolphinius replied absently. "It gives a good indication of how far a student might one day progress." He was still lost in thought, considering the implications of his liege's ability and magical powers.

"It's a very common practice?" Richter asked, something clicking in his mind. The chamberlain nodded, and the chaos seed cursed softly. It now made more sense why Hisako had given him so many Life spells all at once. She had been helping him, yes, but she had been testing him as well. If she didn't know about his Limitless ability, then she had at least suspected and now had a bit of proof. He started speaking under his breath, "That wily old b-"

"It is especially amazing that you were able to absorb all the spells seeing as how one of them is *rare*," Ran'dolphinius began, "and the others are-"

"You know," Richter interrupted, "you mentioned something about my Analyze skill being *rare* earlier. Now you're talking about a *rare* spell." He put the same slight extra emphasis on the word that he had heard Randy use, "What do you mean exactly?"

The chamberlain gave him yet another of those “Oh honey...” looks.

Richter’s lips thinned and he quietly murmured, “Goddammit,” before speaking up again, “Okay. Hit me with it. What the fuck else don’t I know?”

Shrewdly, sensing his liege’s fragile emotional state, Ran’dolphinius simply explained that spells had a class system not unlike weapons and items. The rankings were *common*, *uncommon*, *unusual*, *scarce*, *rare*, *epic*, *mythic*, *legendary*, and *God-tier*. Spells with greater rarity were apparently much sought after and cost a great deal more even if they were low level. Some were even considered priceless and could not be bought. The more rare the spell, the more rare the effect they produced. Sometimes it was just a random and seemingly pointless manifestation, but other times the effects could change the very face of The Land.

Richter nodded while he reached up and rubbed the necklace he always wore. The Necklace of Scry Defense was one of the first items he had found upon coming to The Land. He had come across other magical necklaces, but for some reason he had always felt the need to stay with this first one. It was supposed to “block all but God level scrying spells.” Richter knew he might be completely paranoid, but then again, he caught enemies like crabs in Saigon. And like his Uncle Ko always said, you were only paranoid if they *weren’t* out to get ya.

“Well, how do I know how rare my spells are?” Richter asked.

“The easiest way is simply to have someone tell you their rarity.”

Ran’dolphinius then went on to explain that the spell which let Richter breathe underwater was *rare*. The one that summoned the magic fish was *unusual* and the others were *common*. “By reading the correct books, you can increase your Lore skill as well. That may allow you to identify the rarity of certain spells. With a Lore of one, you should be able to identify any of your spells that are *common* or *uncommon*. Anything higher will most likely show up as ‘unknown,’ until you know a sufficient amount of Lore. Do you know any, my lord?”

Richter did as the Spy suggested and accessed the spell list on his interface. To his surprise, Randy was right. Most of his spells did have a classification of *common*. A few had the word *uncommon* appear next them as well. A few others had *unknown* written next to them, including his Settlement, Deeper Magic, and Chaos spells. He’d mostly started reading his Lore books so that he could identify magic items.

“I’m level one in Lore,” Richter admitted. “I have a book that is supposed to get me to level two, but-”

Ran’dolphinius chuckled slightly, “I understand, my lord. Lore books can be extremely dry. I recommend that you continue your studies,

however. Lore can affect many skills and can open up possibilities that otherwise would be closed to you.”

“I just thought it seemed pointless in light of my Analyze skill and my Identify Enchantments Talent.”

“It is true that your Analyze is impressive, but that only gives information. Increasing your Lore skill can help you with a greater understanding of The Land, yourself, and the many creatures and magics of this world. It can even unlock mysteries and offer quests that would otherwise forever stay beyond your grasp.”

Richter nodded and promised himself that he’d start taking his education seriously again. The chamberlain went on to explain that skills also had class ranks. The system was the same until it reached *legendary*, which was where it ended. Ran’dolphinius said he had heard stories of skills stronger than that, but did not know of any from personal experience.

The chaos seed hadn’t ever tried to qualify his skills by rarity, but he supposed it made perfect sense. Skills arose from affinities, after all. It was only natural that some affinities were more common than others. He already knew that magical affinity was not overly common for instance, which in turn made magical skill equally rare to find. When he looked at spellbooks, they also had rarities listed. Richter had always assumed it referred just to the

item itself, but now that he was thinking about it, the spell the book contained would probably also be a determining factor.

Ran'dolphinius started giving examples. Cooking was an example of a *common* skill. Martial skills like Swordsmanship, Shields, and Archery were *uncommon*. Magical affinity in one of the basic elements was *unusual* or *scarce*, depending on one's race and other qualifiers. Dwarves were more likely to learn Earth magic, for instance, and less likely to learn Life magic, Krom to the contrary. High elves were more likely than other races to develop magical talent, so Light magic might be only *uncommon* for their people.

They also spoke about abilities. As they were so varied and many times unique, there was no scaling system for them. Many people in The Land were not even born with an ability. Ran'dolphinius guessed that Richter's abilities were the equivalent of a *rare* skill, however, if not *epic*.

The next thing they began speaking about were Richter's new spells, "I know many of these are of no value in combat, but I assure you that they are essential to survival in the Labyrinth. You will find every conceivable terrain and situation in that place. There may come a time that the first spell I have taught you, how to find water, will be the most useful magic you have."

"I can see why finding water would be important," Richter acceded.

“What about the rest?”

“*Summon Weak Aether Carp* is just as it sounds. It summons a magical fish. The creature has some offensive capability, but it is best used for support. It is at least five feet long and can eat smaller creatures. Its true usefulness is that it is an aquatic creature. If you summon it on land it will die quickly, but if you are in the water it can be a strong ally. By holding the fish, it can propel you quickly through the water. In addition, using Water magic while it is present reduces the casting cost by 2%. It may not seem like much, but it might be the difference between life and death.”

Richter nodded thoughtfully. This was the first summoning spell he had learned that couldn't successfully be used on land, but he saw the wisdom of having a diverse spell bank. A spell like this might have helped him in his fight against the skaths, or when he was going after the shiverleaf fronds. That made him think about the baby skaths and how he needed to spend some time with them soon. That, in turn, made him think about how he needed to find a new pet. He felt a surprisingly strong pang of loss as he thought about the shale adder. He supposed it wasn't truly dead, as it was now the Harbinger of the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos, but he still felt like he had lost something precious. It had been a staunch ally through many battles. The chaos seed motioned for Ran'dolphinius to continue.

“Perhaps the most versatile spell I taught you is *Teatro's Weak Water*

Casting. Its rank is *rare*. The verbal component of spells obviously becomes impossible if your mouth is underwater. This spell allows you to speak clearly despite being underwater. Do not forget, however, that it offers no protection against drowning. If you run out of air, you will die even if this spell has not elapsed.”

“Good safety tip,” Richter said wryly. He may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer all the time, but he knew that he needed air to live. The chaos seed wasn’t complaining about Randy’s explanation of the spell though. He had just become dangerous and deadly underwater.

“I must now ask, my lord” Ran’dolphinius began delicately, “would you like me to start instructing you in the ways of Water magic and rogue skills? If the answer is yes, I only ask three things. First, that you keep secret my Profession and Specialty unless I give you permission to do otherwise. Second, that we make a concerted effort to explore the Labyrinth and hopefully find a Node road to the Dungeon under Yves. Lastly, when we train, all that matters is my experience. At those times, I must be the master and you the student if I am going to teach you properly.”

Before Richter could respond a notification window appeared.

You have been offered a Quest: **Spells and Skills for Silence I**

Your chamberlain and new Companion is much more than you ever

suspected. Over nearly a century of life, he has garnered many skills, spells, and capabilities. He offers to share them with you freely, but you must make your best effort to explore the Labyrinth.

Required Conditions:

- 1) Tell no one of his true nature.
- 2) Submit to Ran'dolphinius' direction when actively training with him.

Optional Condition: Find a path to the Dungeon that the royal palace in Law is built upon, the Hall of Elemental Hunters.

Reward: Instruction in Water magic and rogue skills.

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: Possible loss of Ran'dolphinius as a villager

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Richter blinked. On the surface, it sounded like a really good deal. He had already gained a crapload of useful spells from his chamberlain. There was also the point that studying under someone that had reached *master* rank would let him power level through his skills. His rogue skills were sorely lacking. The chaos seed's Limitless ability meant he could advance in any direction, but he'd definitely become magic-focused of late.

He had a strong suspicion that ignoring other parts of his education would have serious repercussions in the future. The penalty for failure was also the possible loss of Randy altogether. Richter just couldn't imagine running the village without him.

On the other hand... the man was a Spy! That third condition of following him as a student made logical sense, but he wondered if there were a hidden trap in the words. He really wanted to trust Ran'dolphinius. The man had always been awesome, but isn't that what a Spy would do? Get his trust and then...

Richter had to almost physically get control of himself. No! He had already decided not to do this. Richter looked his Companion in the eye. He trusted him. And the man was his Companion. It was in the wording. That only happened as long as their "goals aligned." There were things Ran'dolphinius wasn't telling him, he had admitted as much, but Richter trusted him. There was a question he needed answered first before accepting though.

"What do you mean by a Node road?"

"In Dungeons and the Labyrinth, there are Nodes scattered throughout. If you touch one of these, you can transport instantly to another location. There is a caveat, however. Every Node is a part of a vast

network. Though I have touched Nodes in the Hall of Elemental Hunters, I cannot transport there from this Dungeon because I have not touched the Nodes in between.”

The possibilities of that started racing through Richter’s mind, “So if we can find the Nodes between here and there, you could transport us into the palace of Law?”

“No, my lord,” Ran’dolphinius said definitively. His voice took on the sing-song aspect heard when someone was repeating an old adage, “‘Dungeons are for adventure, not war.’ The Node road only works for whoever touches that actual Node. Even if we found our way all the way to the entrance of the Hall of Elemental Hunters, I still could not transport you to any other location in that Dungeon until you touched those Nodes yourself. This is also a good time to warn you never to take a large army into the Labyrinth. You may have already noticed that your War Leader skill does not work in the Dungeon?”

Richter nodded, “Yeah, I was meaning to ask you about that.”

“It is because the magic of the Labyrinth polices such things. If you enter the Dungeon with too large a party, you will gain no drops and you will also find yourself afflicted with penalties. Blows that should have landed will miss. Attacks your armor should rebuff will find your flesh. There is no

way around this. There are cautionary tales of leaders foolish enough to try to take armies within the Labyrinth itself. They have each been destroyed to the last man. Taking a party larger than permitted into the Labyrinth attracts the very worst and strongest monsters, colossal horrors that none can resist. I will repeat myself, and please, pay heed to this warning, my lord, ‘Dungeons are for adventure, not war’.”

The chamberlain’s tone was deadly serious, and Richter took his warning to heart, “That begs the question though. How many people can I safely take into the Dungeon? And does that mean only one group can enter the Dungeon at a time?”

“In answer to your first question, my lord, the standard party of five is what is allowed. There are ways to increase this. It is possible to gain an evolution to your Mark of the Adventurer called Logistics that increases party size. There are Adventurers who make a living from having increased that particular evolution several times, allowing for much larger party sizes even if they are not strong fighters themselves.

“In regard to a limit on the number of parties, I do not know. The Hall of Elemental Hunters is so large and so old that I know of no issues with many parties entering at once. For this Dungeon, without having even entered, I cannot say.”

Richter checked his Dungeon interface for an answer, but again, it was a function blocked out saying he needed a “Dungeon Keeper.” A prompt he was getting very tired of seeing. Another prompt still hovered in his vision though, the quest offer.

He chose “Yes.” Then he spoke clearly and directly to his chamberlain, “I am not a fool. I know that I have much to learn, but I am not a fool. You are a man of secrets. I have ample reasons not to trust you, but I also have many good reasons to give you trust. I choose to keep you with me. More than that, I choose to put my faith in you. Please do not disappoint me, or betray our people.” There was just the slightest of emphasis when he said “our” and Richter further punctuated his choice by accessing the Dungeon interface.

You have given **Ran’dolphinius** access to the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos.
You have given **Ran’dolphinius** immunity to the Doubt effect of the
Dungeon entrance.

The chamberlain bowed his head and reverentially said, “I am honored.”

*The trust you have shown to Ran’dolphinius has not gone unappreciated.
Long has he been rejected for his heritage. The fact that you still accept him*

and, better yet, show understanding of why he initially concealed things from you, has strengthened the bond between the two of you. Allowing him access to the Dungeon has made this positive shift in relationship even stronger.

*You have gained +11,178 Relationship Points with **Ran'dolphinius**. Total Relationship Points: +31,695.*

He read and dismissed the prompts, processing the information with a faint smile. His decision to trust was already showing a positive yield. Based on the wording of the prompt, there might have been a decidedly significant drop in their relationship if he had refused the quest. Richter just hoped he wouldn't regret his decision in the long term.

“Thank you for your trust, my lord,” the chamberlain said with the same appreciative tone. “I will not betray it.”

It was a moment of profound truth, and the two men shared a oneness of purpose that few have ever experienced.

That was why Richter couldn't help it, “You got it, Randy!”

A strained groan was his only reply.

CHAPTER 13 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



Randolphus, as he begged Richter to call him, continued explaining the spells he'd bequeathed. The chamberlain made it clear that he didn't want his liege to use his real name and for the thousandth time protested being called Randy. *Weak Purify Drink* and *Weak Swift Swim* were obvious and did just what they sounded like. *Weak Water Damage* gave Richter cause for concern though.

"My weapons are already enchanted," the chaos seed protested. "Aren't I risking a dangerous mixing of magics if I add Water damage to a blade that already has magical damage?"

"It is true that there is some risk, but not with the quality of weapons you use, my lord."

"I didn't think quality mattered for melding magics," Richter replied.

"Where did you hear that?"

“From the sprites. Lady Hisako stressed it to me long ago.”

“Ahhh,” Randolphus commented, nodding in understanding. “We are truly fortunate to have the wood sprites as allies, my lord.” He paused to choose his words carefully, “It is always important to cherish the strengths of one’s allies, but it is equally important to recognize their weaknesses.”

Richter fixed him with a direct look, “Don’t dance with your hand on my ass man, just make your move.”

After a short pause and a disapproving look, which was more than a bit comical on Randy’s inhuman fish face, he replied, “Colorful as always, my lord. What I am trying to say is that while the magic of the sprites is powerful, it is raw. Also, while Lady Hisako is clearly well read, most of her people know nothing of science. While it is true that magics should not be mixed without care, it is entirely possible. Greater control of your Water magic will be something we cover as I teach you. There is more to being an aquamancer than just killing with ice and finding water. For now, I can assure you that between the quality of the blades you wield and the particular metals they are created from, there will be no problem with you using this *novice* level spell even though your weapons are already enchanted.”

Richter gave him a slightly questioning gaze, and Randolphus laughed, “Doubting my knowledge already? Remember my third

condition.” The chaos seed’s look turned slightly abashed. He *had* agreed to heed the aquamancer’s expertise. The chamberlain was only teasing however, “I believe that a questioning mind is the best way to learn. This is good, but in this case just trust me, my lord. While curiosity can be a boon to learning, trust is essential for me to teach you. Do you agree?”

Richter nodded, “I will trust you... evil Spy,” he finished with a grin.

“Hmpf. Thank you, my chaotic liege. These spells I taught you today are only the first step in your education. One day you will be able to benefit from them without even casting. Your inherent magic will allow you to do these things. In a very short amount of time, you will become an *initiate* of Water Magic, and I shall teach you the secret rank bonus.”

Secret rank bonus? How many bombshells was this guy going to drop? It wasn’t surprising that a man like Randolphus would know many things, but secret rank bonuses? Richter had always thought it was strange that the rank bonus of his magic skills only gave a bump to spell strength and resistance. Becoming an *initiate* in Archery let him recover some of his magical arrows after firing them, for instance. *Initiate* rank in Light armor gave a 20% boost to Defense of each piece he wore. “What is it?” Richter asked excitedly.

Randolphus shook his head, “Even if I spoke the words, you could not

understand them. Many have tried before. Even writing the words down does not work. People have read them again and again without comprehension. For some, once you reach the appropriate rank, the words may suddenly click. For others, despite years of meditation, instruction and prompting, they never understand the truth of their skill and so the secret bonuses elude them. I do not believe that will be the case with you, however, my lord.”

“Why not?” Richter asked.

Randolphus shrugged, “You are stubborn to a fault and luckier than a boy in a whorehouse made of candy.”

Richter raised an eyebrow in respect. He kinda liked this new Rogue Randy. “Are there secret rank bonuses for every skill?”

“I do not know,” Randolphus admitted. “I am sure that there are secret bonuses for skills dealing with the other Basic Elements. It is one of the strengths of the royal family of Yves. They long ago discovered all six hidden rank bonuses for the magic skills they excel in; Water, Fire, Earth and Air. I personally have also discovered secret bonuses for several ranks of Stealth.”

“I’m an *initiate* in Stealth,” Richter said excitedly. “Can you teach me the secret bonus?” Everything else fell away and the old excitement of

leveling and gaining more power rose up inside of him.

“We can start,” Randolphus acceded, “but again, it may take time.” Richter waved away the man’s warning and spun his hand in rapid circles to get the man started. The chamberlain just managed to forestall an eyeroll and he did as he was bid. Randolphus began to speak, but not merely in words. Images appeared in Richter’s mind, a bug walking across water; a black silk scarf sliding over black marble; a man reaching out from a darkened alley, ready to choke the life from an unsuspecting woman.

Richter tried to hold on to his chamberlain’s exact words, but they faded like smoke in the night. Randolphus stopped speaking and looked at him for a moment, before saying, “You do not truly understand Stealth yet, my lord. Do not be frustrated. You will.”

“Wait,” Richter protested. “Just tell me again.”

“Patience, my lord,” Randolphus told him softly. “You will understand soon, but you are not yet ready. Trust me.”

Richter didn’t want to wait, but he’d already misdoubted Randy once. Also, a truth he had learned long ago was that few things were messed up by taking his time, but many things were ruined by moving too quickly. Besides, he had another question.

“Okay. That aside, I still don’t fully understand the differences

between the Dungeon and the Labyrinth.”

“A common confusion, milord. The Labyrinth is an entire world. No one knows how large it is or if it even ends. What is known, is that it is a source of great treasure and great danger.” His voice took on the sing-song of recitation again, “‘The Labyrinth hides death and power around the same corner.’ Each Dungeon is part of the Labyrinth, but your Dungeon won’t provide entrance to the Labyrinth until it reaches level ten.”

“So...” Richter started thinking about the ramifications.

“Adventurers will be coming, my lord.”

“Because of the beam that shot into the sky?” Richter asked. “That only lasted for a moment.”

Randolphus shook his head. “You may have some Adventurers try to come overland to find you, but they would have almost no success unless they were already nearby. An unlikely proposition as we are so far removed from civilization. Even if that were to happen however, the mists should still protect us. No, milord, the danger comes not from without, but within. You are the actual Master of the Dungeon, correct?”

The chaos seed nodded and Randolphus continued, “That is good. No Adventurers will be able to leave the Dungeon without your consent, but this will not last forever. Your Dungeon has just been born and so it is level one.

It will be safe from them until it is level ten, but after that it will be vulnerable.” Richer nodded for him to continue.

“Your Dungeon can be destroyed,” Randolphus stated simply. Richter’s jaw clenched at the thought of someone coming into his house and trying to cause problems. He was almost tempted to make a ‘chest beating’ pronouncement, but Randolphus continued. “If the Harbinger is slain, and the Item of Power is found and removed from the Dungeon, the entrance here will disappear. Everything the Dungeon was will just become part of the Labyrinth. Even if we dug deep into the earth, we would not find a way back in.”

“How do we stop that from happening?”

“Make your Dungeon as powerful as you can, as quickly as you can. Do not let me overly alarm you. Most Adventurers only want to claim loot and leave. Harvesting a Dungeon’s Item of Power, something that can only occur if the Dungeon Harbinger is given the true death, is a massive undertaking that few would risk. There are those who seek to amass Items of Power, however. Though their numbers are few, they are extremely powerful.”

“Okay so we need to watch out for those a-holes and make the Dungeon stronger. How do we do that?”

“The same way you make any monster stronger,” the Spy replied.
“You feed it.”

“I’m not going to send innocent people into that thing to die,” Richter said firmly and with a touch of anger. Was this Randolphus’ *evil* nature shining through?

“I would never suggest that, my lord,” Randolphus promised him.
“Honestly, I knew that you would find that idea abhorrent, but it is still good to see your reaction.” The Spy’s eyes grew hooded, “I have served others who were not bothered by such atrocities.” He shook his head. “Though we will not condemn innocents to death, it does not change the fact that one of the best ways to grow the Dungeon is to feed it. A steady diet of Adventurers will give it the energy it needs. There are multiple ways to accomplish this, but we can discuss them at a later date.”

“Thankfully,” Randolphus continued, “it is not only people that can feed the Dungeon. It should generate a small amount of power each day in the form of Dungeon Points, and monsters can also feed it. This you must also know: just because Adventurers cannot currently enter the Dungeon from the Labyrinth does not mean that high level monsters of the Labyrinth are under the same restriction. Dungeons are concentrated magic. They will make the density of magical power grow in the areas surrounding them, but they will also concentrate that magic in themselves. That focused power will

draw other monsters from the Labyrinth into your Dungeon. It could happen at any time. With your Dungeon being so young it is unlikely that we will attract high level monsters at this point, but it is possible.”

“Okay, so what’s the problem with that though?” Richter asked.

“Obviously, if we’re in there when it happens it will be dangerous, but otherwise it’s just monsters killing monsters. Either way, we get the energy and the Dungeon grows, right?”

“That is true,” Randolphus conceded, “but you are not thinking about the infrastructure of the Dungeon. Over time Rooms will develop that provide useful and valuable additions to the Dungeon. Traps will be laid, and resources will be developed that can be harvested to boost village growth. All of these things are just expressions of concentrated magic, however, at least until they are taken out of the Dungeon. A truly high-level monster from the Labyrinth could kill every Dungeon monster, including the Harbinger. It could consume all loot and chests, destroy any Rooms, and then absorb ambient magic from the Dungeon and the Item of Power. There are tales of Labyrinth monsters absorbing every ounce of accumulated energy from a Dungeon. It does not kill the Dungeon, but such a monster could take so much that the Dungeon is forced to start over at level one.”

“Okay,” Richter said, “that’s bad too. Got it, but you still haven’t answered my original question. What is the Labyrinth?” There was more

than a touch of exasperation in his voice. He hated not knowing things, and he hated even more being shown the complete depth of his lack of knowledge. He'd always heard about how there was no shame in ignorance, only in willful ignorance that does not seek to correct itself. Richter had always thought that people who said things like that could eat a dick.

The chamberlain saw his lord's irritation and tried again to explain. "Every Dungeon ever created adds to the Labyrinth. They are entrances and exits from this world to that world. There are unfathomably large areas that comprise the Labyrinth that are not Dungeons, but they operate in much the same way. The Labyrinth contains every terrain and situation you can imagine. To even begin to understand however, you must also add in every dream and nightmare that anyone has ever had, and then add in the wildest thoughts of every child that has not yet been born and that will never be born." Randolphus suppressed a small chuckle at seeing Richter's irritation grow. He'd had a similar reaction nearly a hundred years ago when a mentor had said something similarly nonsensical to him. Though the chamberlain believed in propriety, he was not above having a little secret fun at his lord's expense.

With a straight face, Randolphus continued, "I know that may be difficult to conceptualize, my lord, but that is by design. There are areas of the Labyrinth that would assault your sanity just from one brief glimpse of

them. I have seen and done things that would make some run from me in horror, yet even I am sometimes plagued by memories of what the Labyrinth holds. Add in then whatever terrors might fuel your worst nightmares and you will perhaps have the barest inkling of what you might meet in the Labyrinth. It operates independently of space and sometimes even time. Entering the Labyrinth from this location, you might find another Dungeon that lets out on the other side of the planet though you have only traveled a mile. You cannot even be sure that taking the same path in the Labyrinth will always lead you to the same place. The only sure way to return somewhere are the Nodes. Otherwise, you will be trapped in a nightmare that makes demons piss their cloven hooves.” The Spy shivered. That involuntary reaction, even more than his rare breach of decorum, sold to Richter what Randy was trying to impart. The Labyrinth was not to be trifled with.

It was quiet between the two men for a moment, until Richter asked, “The black spike outside of the Dungeon?”

“It is a Node, my lord.”

“Then why did a prompt I received about the Dungeon call it a ‘transport sphere,’ dolphin-head?”

Randolphus blinked, before responding with just a touch of heat, “If you were a dwarf it would have been called a ‘bogadh s’fein’ and if you were

a gnome it would have been ‘kiniso kar’. There are tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of languages in The Land. Do you not think that terminology might change based on the language used?”

He’s digging at me for calling him dolphin-head, Richter thought, hiding a smile. He liked someone that could push back if shoved.

“And of course,” the chamberlain continued dismissively, “prompts are not actually based on language.” When he saw Richter’s confused look, his own eyes widened in shock. “You do not think that people are actually reading prompts, do you my lord?”

“What else would they be doing?” Richter asked with genuine confusion.

“Prompts are a law of nature, of the very cosmos,” Randolphus said slowly as if speaking to a moron. “They reflect our connection to the Universe itself. Do you think that only those who are literate can understand their prompts? That everyone else just has boxes that appear in their vision that they can never understand? You do know that most of the population of Yves are illiterate, correct, my lord?”

Richter was not quite meeting his chamberlain’s gaze at this point. There was another moment of silence between the two of them. Randolphus opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it with a small pity-filled frown.

He opened his mouth to speak again, but closed it a second time. Then he just blew out a breath, loud and slow. Silence reigned, until Richter couldn't take it anymore.

“Of course, I knew that!” he blustered.

“Of course, you did,” the chamberlain agreed quickly, nodding like his head was about to fall off.

More silence, with both men not quite looking at each other. Richter realized he had just admitted to the equivalent of thinking the sun moved across the sky because of solar wind. Of course, everyone couldn't read the prompts. It was a fucking feudal society! This was not easy to recover from. Still, he had to know, “For the sake of argument, just as a mental exercise, you understand,” Randolphus nodded and pursed his lips in ‘sympathetic’ total agreement, “how else would someone understand their prompts if they didn't actually read them?”

“Well, my lord,” the chamberlain started slowly. Still a bit too slowly by Richter's estimation, but the chaos seed didn't interrupt, “most children are taught this exercise-” He coughed harshly when he saw his liege's glare, “As I was saying, this is an exercise that someone as wise as you should grasp easily. When you are given a prompt, I am sure you know how to minimize it to the side of your interface. For lack of a better term, you can

maximize the information instead. When the prompt comes, let the information wash over you. Your deep mind will register the knowledge at a fundamental level and will supply the relevant portion to your surface mind.”

Richter assumed that the man meant *conscious* and *unconscious* when he said “deep mind” and “surface mind.” Even if Randy didn’t, the chaos seed would be damned before he asked another question until he tried to figure this out himself. The only question was, “How do I test it?” He didn’t have any prompts waiting at the moment.

“The easiest way to summon a prompt immediately is to take a small amount of damage,” Randolphus supplied.

“Can this technique work in combat too?” Richter said with enthusiasm, his chagrin quickly replaced with excitement. The possibility of being able to register his combat log in a way that wasn’t distracting was enough to make him forget his earlier embarrassment.

“Yes, my lord. What have you been doing with your combat notifications up until now?”

“I just turned them off,” Richter said reasonably. “They were distracting.”

Once again Randolphus gave him the look and Richter felt like he actually heard it this time, “Ohhh, honey...”

The short-lived, embarrassment-free moment passed and Richter flared his nostrils, “Alright, alright. Let’s do this.”

I need damage, he thought to Alma. **Please bite me.**

She immediately latched onto his hand hard enough to draw a good amount of blood.

“Yeaooow!” he shouted, yanking his hand away. He knew that he had told her to do it but...

Not even a small protest before you maul me? he protested.

It is always my goal to serve you, master, she thought to him sweetly.

His health had dropped by a small amount and continued to fall slowly as his *Bleeding* status took another health point every few seconds. Prompts appeared in his view, but he consciously didn’t read them.

“Now,” Randolphus started, “if the notifications windows have reappeared, imagine them becoming even larger and closer in your view until they wash over you.”

“That’s it?” Richter asked. The chamberlain nodded, so he focused his will on the prompt. It was surprisingly easy. The translucent window grew larger and flowed easily towards him, and then he just knew.

Richter bitten by Alma for 5 Piercing damage.

A faint smile came to his face as Alma healed him, leaving only a small bleeding effect. Richter turned his focus to the other prompt that had appeared; once again it flowed over him and he just had the information.

You are **Bleeding!** You will lose 1 HP every 5 seconds for the next 32 seconds.

“This is amazing!” Richter said looking at his chamberlain. A golden glow surrounded his familiar as Alma healed the bleeding. This time he didn’t hesitate. The window barely flickered into existence before flowing over him.

Richter has been healed by Alma using **Weak Slow Heal** for 57 Health (30 base x 50% Life Mastery x 41% Intelligence)

“Uhhh... yes, my lord. Amazing!” The fact that Randolphus was humoring him was not lost on the chaos seed. Richter was too taken with just how strong his familiar was to care though. Seeing as how he was already getting schooled, he figured: why not ask another question?

“I’ve been wondering about this for a while. What is the importance of my attributes in changing the strength of spells or combat damage? Alma has a 41% boost to her spell power, for instance.”

Randolphus blinked, “Just what is your familiar’s Intelligence?”

Richter did a quick check, “Eighty-two.”

The Spy looked at Alma with renewed respect. For her part, the dragonling strutted a little when she saw Randy’s obvious admiration.

Brat, Richter thought to her.

Hater, she thought back, still preening.

I have got to stop teaching her these phrases, Richter thought to himself.

“Your familiar is quite impressive, my lord. Is she also able to develop her own skills?”

“No,” Richter replied, “at least I don’t think so. Life magic is an ability for her.”

“Then I would say it is your affinity that affects her Intelligence bonus, though it would be her own attribute that determines the base.”

Richter just drummed his fingers on the table and fixed his chamberlain with a glare.

“Let me attempt to explain in a different way, my lord. As you have already found, one’s attributes can affect their ability to, in turn, affect the world. Intelligence increases spellpower, Wisdom increases spell defense, and Strength increases melee damage. Agility can also increase melee

damage to a smaller extent, and in addition increases accuracy of both ranged and melee weapons. Dexterity increases ranged damage. There are countless other examples, but those are some of the most common. The bonus that a person gains from a stat varies however, based upon...” The chamberlain trailed off as something occurred to him. He looked at Richter with fresh wonder in his eyes. “I know that I have said it before, my lord, but your Limitless ability is truly powerful. I believe my earlier assessment that it might be *rare* or *epic* was too modest. It could very well be *mythic* or even *legendary*.”

“Wait for it!” Richter said with a smile, channeling NPH.

“My lord?” Randy asked, completely not following.

“I was just saying that I’m legen... what do cows make?”

“Milk?” came the slow response a few moments later.

“Dairy!” Richter exclaimed, delighted with himself. “Legend-dairy.”

He was busting a gut at this point.

All he got back was a deadpan stare, which was actually a bit lucky because Alma was considering biting him again just to punish him for his horrible sense of humor.

“If I may continue, my lord?” Randolphus asked.

Richter rolled his eyes at his Companion’s distinct lack of comedic

appreciation. “Go ahead.”

“As I was saying, the bonus an attribute provides is based upon the skill being used and your affinity in that skill. A 50% affinity in Life magic, for example, would mean that each point of your Intelligence would increase spell power by 0.25%. A 100% affinity, conversely, would give a 0.5% increase for each point. Your familiar’s spell power seems to be affected by her own Intelligence, but your Limitless ability also means that all of your skills have a 100% affinity no matter how far you progress. That is why her Intelligence of eighty-two gives her a 164% bonus to spell power when using Life magic. Wisdom gives a similar boost to general magic resistance. The other attributes also give bonuses, but the boost per point is even higher and normally ranges from 1% for a 50% affinity and 2% for someone such as yourself, my lord.”

Richter thought about this newly-revealed facet of his Limitless ability. An affinity of 100% meant not only that he could learn any skill, but that it was also much easier for him to progress in those skills. Most people lost affinity points as they progressed in their skills. That meant the next level was harder to obtain both because their natural ability had less of an effect and because higher levels were just harder to obtain. Richter didn’t have to deal with one of those handicaps as his affinity remained at 100% whether he was skill level one or one hundred. He’d been told that once an

affinity had fallen to 50% it could take years to progress even one level.

All of that had brought him great power in only six months, but now he was hearing the ability had an even greater impact than he'd known. If Randy was right, every point he invested in an attribute would make the associated skill stronger to the max amount. It didn't change anything per se; he'd always known he wanted more attribute points. It was nice to know that he was even more of a thug than he'd thought!

After he finished patting himself on the back, Richter started thinking about what that meant for others though, "So if everyone else's affinities will gradually decrease as they advance in level... this means that the bonus they get from their attributes will decrease as well, right?"

"My lord is quite astute," Randolphus told him in approval. "It would be paradoxical that the further one advanced a skill, the less of a bonus Attribute Points would provide. Scholars believe that is why there is a second system which also affects the relationship between APs and skill. The bonus is also affected by the rank someone holds in a skill. As you know, the six skill ranks are *novice*, *initiate*, *apprentice*, *journeyman*, *adept* and *master*. While increasing your skill level provides increasing bonuses each time, reaching certain levels increases your rank, which can provide further unique capabilities. Becoming an *initiate* in Light Armor, for instance, unlocks the *Synergy* bonus which increases the defense of each piece of light armor you

wear as long as you are only wearing light armor.”

Richter nodded. He’d known all of this beforehand and actually had the *Synergy* bonus.

“Skill ranks do more than just provide more capabilities. Each rank you reach after *novice* will guarantee a certain modifier from your Attribute Points independent of affinity. It will perhaps be easier if I write this down. I will use Life magic as an example again.”

The chamberlain drew two simple tables. The first illustrated the attribute modifier based on affinity.

AFFINITY	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
BONUS	0.25%	0.3%	0.35%	0.4%	0.45%	0.5%

It was easy enough to follow. Just like Randy had said before, every point of Intelligence Richter, or Alma, possessed had the potential to increase the power of their spells by 0.25-0.5%. Thanks to his Limitless ability, the boost was always maxed at 0.5% per point. The next table the chamberlain drew showed the effect of ranks on the bonus.

RANK	Novice	Initiate	Apprentice	Journeyman	Adept	Master
BONUS	0.25%	0.28%	0.31%	0.34%	0.37%	0.4%

The difference was obvious and clear. Anyone that reached a rank would be guaranteed a point modifier to the relevant skills, but after *novice* the boost would never be as much as someone with a high affinity. Put another way, even someone who spent decades becoming a master would not have the boost to their spell power that he did just because of his 100% affinity in every skill. Every point he invested was just worth *more* than other people's. Limitless didn't just make it possible for him to learn every skill, it made him stronger in every skill as well. His Strength let him hit harder point for point than even a sword *master* and his Intelligence made his spells stronger than anyone that might have the same stats. Limitless was stronger and more versatile than he had ever imagined!

Randolphus watched the comprehension dawn on his liege's face, "Yes, my lord. Study and dedication can take someone far, but those that are born blessed with a high affinity will always reach heights denied to the rest of us. Is this not also true of your world?"

The first thought that came into Richter's head was Mozart and Salieri. Some things were indeed true no matter where you were. Seeing his liege's nod, Randolphus continued, "I believe you begin to see just how truly blessed you are, my lord. You do not seem to face the same limitations as every other skilled being in The Land. Your power could one day rival that

of the banished gods.” He gave a faintly wry smile, again somewhat ruined by his sharp teeth, “I am glad we are on the same side.”

Richter gave a short laugh, “Me too, bud.”

Randolphus continued talking about the ‘new’ way of absorbing prompt information, “As you can see, letting the notifications flow into you is much faster than simply reading them. You could do this with every prompt you are provided, but I do not advise this. The prompts can become nothing more than random noise, and if you are distracted when one appears, you may forget the information. What I recommend is that you make your combat notifications automated. With training, your deep mind can filter what is important and what is not. Knowing what is happening in a battle may save your life one day. I further recommend that you continue to address individual prompts in your daily life. They can be minimized until you are ready, without any real danger.”

So basically, the exact opposite of what I have been doing, Richter thought. Still, it was a good point. “I’m so glad I’m finally able to talk about this stuff, man. Now my next question...”

Richter was interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the hallway outside of the room. Without even a wave of his hand, the chamberlain resumed his previous appearance. With a low and urgent voice, he cautioned

his lord, “Remember, tell no one of my true nature. I will not be using my ability to cloak myself while in the village; it limits my power too much. I am using a Talent of my Specialty to look completely human. It will not limit my capabilities, but it is also not perfect as a disguise.”

“I will keep your secret,” Richter promised. “Do not break faith with me, and I will not break faith with you. Please know that you can be yourself in this village though, if you choose to be.”

Randolphus bowed his head in thanks. The guard knocked on the door and Richter bade him enter. The man was carrying Richter’s weapons and armor. A village woman followed behind with a steaming ewer of water. The woman helped him wash, and the conversation between the two Companions turned to more mundane village matters. Also important, but boring as Mormon sin.

Once Richter was more presentable, the guard helped him don his armor. Richter didn’t like walking around the village in full gear, but the chamberlain said it was important that his people saw him as powerful, especially after a battle. Richter checked to make sure his blades were loose in their sheaths, almost a matter of reflex at this point. Then his face hardened and he spoke firmly, “Let’s go bury our dead.”

CHAPTER 14 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



Alma flew up to his shoulders and they all walked out of the catacombs. Futen was waiting by the cave mouth and silently started floating along beside Richter. At the bottom of the hill, Sion, Terrod and Caulder were waiting along with a contingent of guards and meidon sprites. All clapped their hands to their chests in salute.

“I have assigned twenty guards to watch the refugees,” Terrod informed Richter. “Forty are standing watch by the grave. The rest of your forces stand beside you, my lord.”

“The meidon sprites are with you, Lord Richter,” Sion seconded loudly, and his entire squad of magic archers, more than eighty strong, straightened to attention.

Richter was blown away. He had led his forces to victory, but it had been at a heavy cost. Families were broken in a way that could never be mended. Open revolt by his people wasn’t something he had overly worried

about, but he still hadn't been sure that his people wouldn't be cursing his name either. Seeing such a unified show of support touched him to his core.

It also reaffirmed his determination to lead his people to power and security. He had been doubting his decision to attack the goblin settlement since seeing the butcher's bill, but knowing his people remained steadfast in their support of him erased that worry. The goblins had been a threat to his entire community, and after seeing the power of the Bloodstone he knew that Hisako had been correct. The stone could have defeated even the magical mists that protected his village. The death toll would have been far worse if they had waited until the goblins were entrenched and reinforced.

He didn't even want to consider what might have happened if the goblins had been able to get through the shield that had protected the Chaotic shard. The best-case scenario would have been that the chaotic energy was unleashed all at once. Just a small fraction of it had escaped when Richter had found it. That small bit though had been enough to change the very landscape of The Land. It had created his Dungeon and the three strange areas around it. Unleashing all the Chaos at once could have literally done anything. The only thing worse might have been the goblins harnessing the power to their own dark ends.

Richter returned the salutes of his fighting men and women. Then, with them marching behind him, he started walking towards the village gate.

Night had fallen, but mist lights hovered in the air all around them, easily lighting the way. Before he had crossed half the distance, he was met by his Companion Elora, queen of the celestial pixies. She hovered in midair, wearing a snow-white dress made from the leaves of the Quickening. Behind her flew what remained of her children, those that had not suffered *sakeru*, the severing.

“Queen Elora,” Richter greeted her softly.

“My Lord Richter,” she replied, curtsying in midair. There was no accusation in her gaze when she straightened, but there was sadness. Behind her, the pixies sang a low-pitched dirge of lament and remembrance.

“I am sorry for the loss of your children,” he told her with feeling.

“The Land is a place of harsh realities. The most cruel truth is also the most common. Death comes quickly to us all. I learned that long ago as my people died from a magical plague, one by one, until I was the very last. I have not forgotten that you are the reason my children have been able to live in safety unto this point.” She flew closer until she was only inches from his face. Her skin shone with the faintest of luminescence. He would not have been able to see her in the dark from even a few feet away, but this close he could see the faint glow coming from her silver skin, like a moonlit sea on a clear night. Alma shifted on his shoulders, not liking any being coming so

close to her master, but the brilliant dragonling knew Richter had little to fear from the pixie queen.

“I do not blame you for their deaths, Lord Richter. I have learned that keeping them away from their meitu’meidon is no guarantee of safety, however. Out of respect to you, my liege, I fought against the dictates of my own heart when you suggested they stay out of battle. I know now that was wrong. Despite their age... my children...” Elora paused, pained, then spoke with resolve, “Pixies belong with their bonded sprites. My children must be allowed to accompany the other half of their souls into danger. At least then they can help to protect one another.”

Richter had indeed been pushed to keep the pixie children safely within the confines of the village. They had petulantly protested, but neither the meidon sprites nor Elora had resisted his will. Now though, he couldn’t argue with what Elora was saying. Disregarding the facts that she was their mother and their queen, she was right. He hadn’t known at the time that the death of a meidon sprite would also cause this *sakeru* in their bonded pixie. At least together they were both more likely to survive. Richter sighed with the weight of his responsibilities. Once again, he was reminded that his old conceptions of right and wrong that had worked on Earth might be too rigid for The Land.

“It will be as you say, Queen Elora,” he replied formally. Then, with

a softer tone, he asked her, “Will you come with me to put our fallen to rest?”

“Of course, my lord. My place is at your side.” So, saying, she flew over his head and hovered above and behind him like a halo. When he started walking forward, the pixie children fell in behind their queen. Such was the procession of Richter of the Mist Village. To his left, the men and women of the guard followed his Companion Terrod, strong and steadfast. To his right, the meidon sprites walked silently behind his Companion Sion, loyal and true. Behind him trailed his Companion Randolphus, silent and watchful, and above him flew his Companion Elora, noble and hopeful. The five Companions moved together towards the new gravesite of the Mist Village, united in purpose to give honor to their dead.

CHAPTER 15 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



Mist lights had been arrayed around the mass grave, and the bodies had been laid within. Quiet sobbing echoed around the gathering and the villagers clumped together to look down at the dead. As Richter watched, he saw no separation of humans, elves, dwarves, or gnomes. Village guards stood in a loose circle around the funeral, on the lookout for monsters or beasts that might attack now that they were all outside the village walls.

The wood sprites of Hisako's army stood on the other side of the grave, silent and respectful. Their own dead would be taken back to the Hearth Tree to feed its roots and thereby continue to nourish the tribe. The Hearth Mother herself stood at one end of the grave waiting quietly for Richter, Yoshi at her side.

As the chaos seed walked closer, the murmuring conversation ceased. The villagers watched their lord approach, flanked by his vassals and Companions. The pixies spread out in the air above everyone present,

continuing to sing their soft lament. Elora hovered over the grave itself, leading the song of her people. Tears began to fall more freely from the eyes of almost everyone present. The village began to grieve.

The guards that had escorted Richter spread out to help in securing the perimeter, following a previous order from Terrod. The meidon sprites did the same. It would be a bold monster that would attack the combined forces standing vigilant this night, but many mindless beasts roamed the dark of the forest.

A small platform had been brought out and placed at the head of the grave. It was just two steps up, but it let all present see him. Alma stood upright on one of his shoulders and Futen floated above the other. Hisako was already there waiting for him. Richter ascended and turned to look out upon the assembly. He began to speak.

“My people,” he projected, looking at his villagers standing to the right of the grave. “My allies,” he continued, looking to Hisako’s sprite army standing on the left. “There is a wisdom from my homeland that I would share with you now. ‘Each day I breathe, I am more convinced that the true tragedy of life is not in its ending, but in its waste. The love that has not been shared, the chances that have not been taken, the craven caution that robs us of what we truly need: meaning.’”

He pointed to the grave and pyres, “These brave men and women fought for us!” he cried. “They fought for you. We will grieve their deaths, but this night, surrounded by darkness with tears on our cheeks, I also want us to celebrate the lives that they led. Their names will be immortalized in stone, but first we will share their names with the air.”

Richter began to recite the names of the dead. The parchment that Randolphus had prepared for him was already etched in his memory. The time he had spent with his fighting men and women made it easy to recall the fallen. As he spoke each name, that soldier’s face came to his mind, and sometimes even a scrap of memory. Perhaps a man laughing at a ribald joke or a woman smiling at a friend’s tale. Soon, tears fell down his cheeks while he paid homage to those who had fallen.

He listed the names of the meidon sprites and finally came to the pixies that had been lost due to *sakeru*. Richter did not know their names, so he simply spoke of the beauty of the pixie race and thanked Elora for her sacrifice. The whole time he had spoken, the mournful dirge of the pixies had continued. Now it rose in intensity. Tears fell from every eye and the villagers held each other in their grief.

Elora’s racial ability, Celestial Pixie Song, activated.

*Know This! You are witness to the **Song of Honored Loss**. The reverence*

*you have shown to the pixies lost to sakeru has moved Queen Elora. She has shared the sorrow of her heart. Everyone present is afflicted with **Cherished Sadness**.*

-100% to village Production, this will improve by +10% per hour.

-95% to motivation of all afflicted for the duration of the Song, this will improve by +10% per hour.

*The celestial pixies understand that sadness is not to be avoided but cherished. The emotional pain caused by **Cherished Sadness** will cleanse the souls of all afflicted.*

Any Morale or Loyalty losses the village would have suffered from the deaths of its people are reduced by -50%.

The emotional healing process for all who have suffered loss is increased by +200%.

An almost crippling sorrow overtook Richter. As he looked around, he saw that even Yoshi and Randolphus wept. Alma pressed her body tightly across his shoulders, and a keening rose among all gathered. An icon that looked like a heart with a crack down the middle appeared in the corner of his vision. It was a sickly green, and a teardrop of the same color oozed from the crack.

You are afflicted with Cherished Sadness.

There was more that Richter was going to say, but the Song accomplished what his words would only have attempted. The healing process had begun. Hisako slid her small hand inside his. As he looked at her, he was surprised at the rough calluses on her palms and fingers. He started to speak, then realized he did not know what to say. Even if he did, his heart could not bear the strain of one more word. She simply nodded at him in understanding and showed him what could be done.

The Hearth Mother raised her voice in song, and hundreds of sprites of various races did the same. For the first time in millennia, sprites joined the other half of their souls in Song. The Song triggered something primal and pure within them, and their voices perfectly complemented the pixies flying above. Richter and the other villagers bathed in the music of pixie and sprite alike as the fallen were sent peacefully to their rest.

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The Song lasted for nearly an hour.

A prompt appeared in Richter's vision that he absorbed and dismissed.

Quest Update: **Unity of the Sorat'Shin II**

Pixies and sprites of various races have joined their voices in song for the first time in millennia. This has reminded them that they can be so much more together than they could ever be apart. Continue your efforts to make the Sorat'Shin, the True Sprites, a reality once again. All sprites, regardless of race, regard meidon sprites with great affection.

+2500 Relationship Points to any sprite relationship with meidon sprites.

It was one step closer to reuniting the sprite peoples. The analytical part of Richter also realized that his Companion Sion was quickly becoming

someone who could rally sprite armies from around the world. That was a discussion for another time though.

Only Futen and the mist workers standing nearby seemed unaffected. The remnant gave a silent order and the grey constructs began shoveling dirt back into the pit soon after the Song started. By the time the pixie and sprite voices fell silent, the grave had been filled in and all that remained was a patch of bare earth. This did not last long. Hisako stepped forward and began to cast.

Soft tones fell from her lips as green energy surrounded her hands. The light fell in gentle waves upon the earth and flowed forward over the grave. Green grass began to appear and in seconds the grave was covered. The radiance faded from her hands, but only for a moment, until she began another casting. This time golden light suffused her hands, and soon flowers of the same shade began to sprout up until the entire area was carpeted in beauty.

Richter smiled at her in appreciation. The sadness and emotion the Song had evoked was still within him, but an hour had passed. The effect was not nearly as absolute as before. His tongue had been frozen as he grieved for his people, but he could now say what was in his heart, “My people,” he began and hundreds of red-rimmed eyes turned towards him, “there were many words that I was going to say, but it all comes down to a

thank you, an apology, and a promise. Thank you for standing with me. I am sorry that I could not save everyone. I promise that no matter what comes for us, I will stand with you.”

There was silence for a moment, then a female gnome holding a small child stepped forward and pointed to the grave, “My husband lies beneath this ground. Before he left to follow you, I begged him not to go. I told him he did not need to fight for you.” She paused, and looked down at her crying babe for a moment, struggling to control herself. She looked back up and the loss on her face nearly broke Richter’s heart anew.

“I remember what he said to me, word-for-word. He told me, ‘I respect our lord, but I would not leave you to fight for him. I am leaving to fight for our family. Lord Richter has made a home for our child where she will get the chance to grow and learn. He is a good man.’ My husband’s name was Potor.” The fierceness in her gaze intensified, “Are you the man that my husband believed you to be? Will you continue to protect us?”

Her questions tipped the scales in his already precarious emotional state. Tears once again fell freely down his cheeks. With a catch in his voice, he said, “I am that man. I will fight and die for your family.” Richter raised his eyes and looked at the rest of his villagers, “I would do the same for all of you! I will not make you false promises. I cannot promise that you will all be safe.” He pointed to the grave, a mirror to the woman that had just

been speaking. “We all know that we are not safe. There is no true safety in The Land, but we are alive! We are alive because of Potor and all our other brothers and sisters who died so that we could live. So that we could live and be free!”

Richter continued to look around, meeting the eyes of his people one by one, “They did not die in vain. We struck a mighty blow against our enemies. Hundreds of goblins and trolls are dead. Our mighty ally, Hisako of the Hearth Tree, was correct. The goblins had a powerful weapon. Maybe not today, or even next week, but one day they would have used it against us. Now though, because of the brave men and women of the Mist Village, we have taken that weapon and it will serve us!” A few scattered cheers rang out.

Ever since returning to the village, Richter had approached this conversation like an apology. All that had been in his mind had been sorrow over the deaths of his people and his responsibility in it. He had led them to war, after all.

Now though, thanks to the words Potor had spoken to his wife, and thanks to her bravery and conviction, he remembered the real truth. The truth that he *was* the man the gnome had described. At least, he strived to be that man every day. Even if he fell short from time to time, Potor had been right. He was making something special here, something that was worth fighting

for. They all were. The Mist Village was more than just earth and stone. It was an idea worth dying for.

Richter looked back at the gnome woman, and repeated, “I am that man. Your husband was right. This village is not just a collection of buildings and people. It is a beginning. Every villager will have the chance to grow their power to the limit of their affinities. It will not be without risk. I will not promise that all of us will make it to the end, but those who do will have earned something more powerful than spells and stronger than steel. You will have earned your freedom from fear. No longer will you have to fear the might of those stronger than you. No longer will you have to fear that each day will bring someone stronger than you who will take your children. No longer will you have to fear being alone. They” he said extending a finger and swinging it above the heads of everyone present, as if to indicate the entire world, “will rue the day they challenged our might! We are not prey! We are predators! And *they* will fear *us*!”

It was dead silent for a moment then one of the villagers shouted, “Through service, ascendance!”

Richter unsheathed his sword and held it up in the air. Trusting Randolphus, he cast *Weak Water Damage*. A blue glow surrounded the blade, making it stand out like a beacon in the night, “Through dedication, transcendence!” he shouted back.

Another villager took up the call, “Through service, ascendance!”

Richter responded once again, and this time several other villagers took up the call, “Through dedication, transcendence!”

Dozens of villagers shouted, “Through service, Ascendance!” Nearly half the crowd shouted back, “Through dedication, TRANSCENDANCE!”

On the next iteration, almost every villager was shouting both the call and the refrain, while Richter stood before them, his green elementum blade held aloft and illuminated by his magic. Even the gnome woman who had questioned him was shouting while throwing her fist into the air. He could not have known that while his words were heartfelt, it was his recent victory and high Charisma and Fame that had made his people’s response almost a foregone conclusion. It didn’t matter though. All that mattered was this moment they all shared, and what it meant for the future.

Hisako watched her fierce-eyed ally bathe in the reverence of his people. Even the meidon sprites that had been part of her own forces days before were caught up in the force of Richter’s personality and were chanting along with the villagers. The pixies circled above him singing a song of loyalty now, and Elora hovered before him, the jewel in his multicolored crown. Hisako still detected no evil within him, but long years of life had made her cautious. The Hearth Mother stood by her ally, but decided to keep

one eye on him and the other on the future.

CHAPTER 17 – Day 141 – Kuborn 31, 0 AoC



Unseen by anyone in the village, a young but powerful creature fed nearby. The crystal stone marking the Dungeon's southern border pulsed. It was still too weak to exert its power for more than a moment, but cold blue light kindled in the heart of the small mountain range, a siren song to animals and beasts alike. Only two animals were ensorcelled, but it was a start, and the Dungeon could not yet feel impatience.

A jenit prowler sniffed and approached the mass of vines that covered the Dungeon's eastern side. It did not know why it felt compelled to approach, but it did so nonetheless. It was cautious, but still entranced by the mesmerizing movement of the writhing plants. The magical beckoning of the crystal stone overrode its natural instincts and it crept closer, and closer, until it was too late.

A mass of vines shot out and wrapped around the prowler's head, legs, and body. It yelped and tried to pull away, but within seconds it had

been dragged into the heart of the carnivorous plant. Tendrils shot first into its mouth, nose, ears, eyes and anus, rupturing and rending. Tears appeared in its hide and more green shoots pierced its body through these meaty pathways. A loud snap came as its spine fractured under the strain. Blood soaked the vines and was greedily lapped up by the predator's roots. Even as the vines fed, the essence of the animal was absorbed by the Dungeon.

On the western side of the Dungeon lay a broad swath of midnight-blue sand. It sparkled faintly in spots where no light touched it, but the light was a distraction evolved eons before to draw the curious and unwary closer. The koran tusker that had been beckoned by the glimmer of the crystal stone did not see a random scattering of light in the night. It saw the eyes of another tusker, challenging it.

The monster squealed and raced forward to do battle, and in so doing crossed onto the sand. It sank like a stone through clouds, not even leaving an imprint to mar the smooth blue surface. While it plummeted downwards, the weight of the sand above it increased. Its body was crushed well before the pressure of the sand above should have been able to do so. The tusker's flesh, blood and organs were all separated, pulped and mashed in a matter of seconds. Its energy was consumed and its pattern was learned.

The Dungeon had fed. It was time to grow monsters.

CHAPTER 18 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



The funeral finished and they all reentered the safety of the village walls. The sadness of the pixies' Song still held them in its grip. After the fervor of Richter's speech had died down, all anyone wanted to do was sleep. Luckily, the guards watching the refugees were far enough away that they were not affected by the pixies' Song. Some were retasked to maintain a watch on the walls. The mists themselves should keep the freed prisoners from causing any trouble. Even still, Richter summoned mist workers to stand behind the village gate. They wouldn't fight, even to defend themselves, but if some beast attacked in the night, it would at least be slowed down.

Richter went inside with the rest of his people. Once again, he offered his quarters to Hisako, but she refused, choosing instead to pass the night under the boughs of the Quickening. In fact, everyone, wood sprite and villager alike, decided the aura of the celestial tree might be exactly what they

needed. Minutes later, the ground around and beneath the white tree was filled with slumbering forms.

Richter's Belt of Sustenance greatly reduced the sleep he required. His weary body and heartsick soul kept him asleep until the sun was well overhead though. An unofficial holiday, a concept that too many of the villagers were completely unfamiliar with, arose. Everyone stayed near the Quickening and spoke of the living and dead. In their sharing, the emotional wounds stayed open and continued to drain away the anger that might have poisoned the village as a whole. The healing continued. Even Richter remained lying on the grass after he awoke and dealt with the prompts he had earned the night before. He practiced his new technique of maximizing the prompts, though he read them as well just to be sure he wasn't missing anything.

Know This! Battles involving your village army have an effect on the day-to-day life of your villagers and the administration of your village.

*Master of the Mist Village, you have won your first **Raid!** Your village statistics have been adjusted accordingly.*

***+25%** total village Morale for having a 100% success rate in battle in your last 5 battles. This will last until your village suffers a military defeat.*

***+100** Morale Points for winning your last battle. This bonus will last for one*

month and will fade by **-25** Morale Points per week.

-30 Morale Points for losing 6% of your total population. (Base -60, decreased by 50% due to Song of Honored Loss.)

+500 Morale Points for adding a Dungeon to the village.

Total Morale Points: **+1,865**. (Base: **+1295** x **25%** Undefeated + **9%** Administrator + **10%** Health)

DING!

Morale Rank of Mist Village increased from **Delighted (rank 2)** to **Elated (rank 3)**. Morale bonus to Fighting Spirit, Population Growth and Productivity increased from 20% to 30%.

“Your people are elated to have such a wonderful lord. They spend time finding ways to brighten your day. You can expect small gifts from time to time.”

Richter stopped. It shouldn't be a surprise that the battle would affect the village mechanics, but still, to see the actual effect was an education. On the one hand, battle could increase the Morale of his village. That was nothing to take for granted. Every rank the village Morale rose increased Population Growth, Fighting Spirit and Productivity by +10%. It wasn't an idle increase. Richter had seen more than a few baby bumps walking around the village.

On the other hand, the boost in Morale was temporary. The loss of Morale from the deaths of his people was permanent though. The message was clear. In The Land, war could be a useful tool to grow one's settlement, but it was not without risk. The simple fact was that luck had played just as much of a role in the battle as skill. Richter was lucky his entire force hadn't been wiped out.

The web traps from the assengai queen, the superior weaponry and potions of his forces, the foolish anger of the enemy commander; all had contributed to their victory, of course. Even with the many advantages they'd had, the combined forces of the wood sprites and Mist Village had only been able to fight the goblins to a standstill. The battle could have easily tipped either way. What had actually won the day was the creation of a new consciousness in the Bloodstone once it had been touched by raw Chaos. That same entity now resided within the Dungeon because of a deal Richter had made. Who knew what the long-term consequences of that decision would be?

Everything had worked out so far, and they had gained a great deal from the battle. Still, Richter resolved not to forget that he had to be more than a warmonger. It also could not be ignored that Richter had burned thousands of gold coins' worth of resources in that one battle. It was not a strategy he could replicate without end. Doing so could lead to anything

from economic ruin to a full-scale revolt of his people. He remembered some of the first words he had heard upon coming to The Land, ‘You are not in a game.’

He went on to the next prompts.

+25% village Loyalty for having a 100% success rate in battle in your last 5 battles. This will last until your village suffers a military defeat.

+50 Loyalty Points for winning your last battle.

+25 Loyalty Points for your speech at the village funeral

-15 Morale Points for losing 6% of your total population. (Base -30, decreased by 50% due to Song of Honored Loss.)

+300 Loyalty Points for adding a Dungeon to the village

Total Loyalty Points: **+2,120**. (Base: 1,472 x 25% Undefeated + 9% Administrator + 10% Health)

DING!

Loyalty Rank of Mist Village increased from **Enthusiastic (rank 2)** to **Reliable (rank 3)**. Base Productivity of your villagers and village now increased from 20% to 40%.

“You can trust your people to do their work without supervision. They begin to put the well-being of the settlement above their own.”

Hmmm, Richter thought. The Loyalty boost from winning the battle was much smaller than the Morale boost, but it also looked to be permanent. It was nice to know that his speech the night before had also gone over well. He was a bit surprised to see such a bump in loyalty for adding a Dungeon to the village. As he thought about it though, he remembered a boost in Loyalty from adding both Core buildings and the Quickening. It seemed that adding monuments that made the village more powerful increased both the Loyalty and Morale of those living within it. Which again he supposed made sense. Who wouldn't be loyal and happy to live in a place that had the potential to make them powerful? It'd be like wanting to leave a town that offered free housing, porn and milkshakes back on Earth.

After internalizing the information, Richter accessed his village status screen to see how well things were progressing overall. There were still many tabs greyed out, but he was heartened by what he could see.

<u>VILLAGE</u>	Rank	Effect
<u>MECHANICS</u>		
Village Tenet #1 – An Honorable Ruler	I	+1 (Base +0.5 x 100% for 25% of population swearing fealty) Change in Loyalty per day (Max +500)
<u>Morale</u>	Elated	+20% Productivity, Population

<p>Total: 1,865</p> <p>Base: 1,295</p> <p>+200 Forge of Heavens</p> <p>+200 Dragon's Cauldron</p> <p>+ 500 celestial pixie birth</p> <p>-175 new villagers <small>(added Kerult 22, 15,386 EBG)</small></p> <p>+ 100 Goblin Raid</p> <p>-30 Population Loss <small>(begun Kuborn 32, 0 AoC)</small></p> <p>+500 Dungeon creation</p> <p>x25% - Undefeated in Battle</p> <p>x9% - Richter's Administration Skill</p> <p>x10% - Health</p>	(rank +3)	<p>Growth and Fighting Spirit</p> <p><i>"Your people are elated to have such a wonderful lord. They spend time finding ways to brighten your day. You can expect small gifts from time to time."</i></p>

<u>Loyalty</u>	Reliable	+40% Productivity
Total: 2,120	(rank +3)	<i>“Your people will believe your words</i>
Base: 1,472		<i>and follow your commands more</i>
+30 Monument		<i>easily. Your words can even start to</i>
+100 Village motto		<i>sculpt their ideas and beliefs. They</i>
+150 from planting		<i>begin to put the well-being of the</i>
Seed Core		<i>settlement above their own.”</i>
+200 Forge of		
Heavens		
+200 Dragon’s		
Cauldron		
+20 Terrod’s speech		
+52 Tenet: Honorable		
Ruler I		
(+1 Loyalty Point per day for max		
100, begun Hacor 24, 15,386 EBG)		
-175 new villagers		
(added Kerult 22, 15,386 EBG)		
+30 Village quests		
+ 500 celestial pixie		

birth + 50 Goblin Raid + 25 Funeral Speech +300 Dungeon x25% - Undefeated in Battle x9% - Richter's Administration Skill x10% - Health		
<u>Health</u> Total: 300 Base: 286 +285 Job: Healer +1 for 5% of population knowing <i>Cure Minor Disease</i> x5% - Healer's Hut	Healthy (rank +2)	+10% Population Growth, Morale, Loyalty, and disposition of your villagers towards you <i>"Your people are healthy and hale.</i>
<u>Fighting Spirit</u> Total: 360 (456*) Base: 300 (380*)	Aggressive (rank +1)	+5% Damage dealt by your forces <small>*Values adjusted only while defending the domain of the Mist Village</small>

+200 Village leader being an Initiate in War Leader +100 Village leader being a Champion +80 Job: Captain of the Guard* x20% - Morale		
<u>VILLAGE</u> <u>DYNAMICS</u>		
<u>Population Growth</u> +20% - Morale +5% - Song of Joy and Remembrance Charisma Bonus +1% - Health +30% - Bounty of Life		+56% to population growth rate Current Village Population: 689
<u>Productivity</u> +20% - Morale		+69% to village activities *not including Song of Honored Loss

+40% - Loyalty +9% - Administration Skill	**additional +10% to constructing buildings due to Workshop level 1 ***additional +5% to building ships due to Ship cradle
<u>Research</u> <i>1 Point per Ley Line:</i> 4 Total <i>0.1 Points per level of</i> <i>Research Skill*: 7.9</i> <small>*Normal research restrictions apply</small> +10% for House of Scholarship	<i>Daily Earned Research: 13.1 RP/day</i> Current Research Topic: Predict Auspicious Times I (Forge of Heavens) 199.05/320 Research Points Projected Time to Completion: 9 days 5 hours 35 minutes 16 seconds

The Mist Village was young, but it was doing well. The bonuses from Morale and Loyalty meant they were primed for rapid growth. Richter reminded himself not to forget that the macro effects that were on his interface didn't take into account individual feelings. Though the overall mood of the village was *Elated*, it didn't mean there wasn't one villager

plotting against him even now. Still, the increased Productivity, Population Growth and Fighting Spirit undeniably put his settlement in a good position for the future.

Specifically, the +56% to Population Growth caught his attention. Richter still felt a little weird knowing that his Life Mastery was making his villagers knocka da boots more than they would be otherwise, but hey, he also wasn't complaining! He did have one irrational fear that one day a mob of chronically pregnant women might murder him in his sleep if they found out his ability was why they kept ending up in the "family" way... but that was a concern for another day.

A more serious consideration had come from one of Randolphus' many reports. The chamberlain had found that not only were the village animals giving birth extremely quickly, but that the young animals were also growing and maturing faster than they should be. The same was true for crops. The benefit to the crops and animals was further increased by the Quickening having reached level two. The celestial tree increased the yield of all resources in his domain by +25%.

Knowing that, of course, brought another irrational fear to Richter's brain. Did his Bounty of Life ability or the Quickening bonus mean that the actual time women were pregnant would be shortened to something like six months? Somehow, he didn't think expectant moms would just take a

shortened gestation in stride. Then again, maybe he'd become their favorite person. That waddle they had at the end didn't look fun, though it did look funny.

Thankful that he'd never been dumb enough to voice that last thought out loud, he moved on to the next tile of the village's status page. The Health of the group was something he really, really didn't want to fall. Living as the lord of a medieval village was all well and good... as long as it didn't actually get *medieval* up in here!

The rewards provided for having reached rank two in the village dynamic were modest, but certainly better than the alternative. On Earth, he'd been a passing student of history as well as a medical student, so he definitely understood the importance of having a healthy population. Richter had a real fear of his population becoming diseased. He'd even had Randolphus start stressing the importance of regular bathing to the villagers. Some of these guys and gals were a bit too used to walking around smelling like an old jock strap.

On a more serious note though, Richter knew that disease could make whole civilizations crumble. The Black Death had wiped out hundreds of millions of people and had stalled progress in Europe for centuries. He didn't even want to think about what the magical equivalent of a plague would bring. The only one he knew about had wiped the entire pixie race off the

face of The Land. It was a profound relief to see that the village was *healthy*.

The Productivity tab was also exciting. His people built things and accomplished tasks significantly faster at this point. As soon as Roswan came back from his Trial, buildings would be popping up like groundhogs on Viagra. It also meant that the speed with which the village could make weapons and armor should increase substantially. That would definitely help fulfill his trade treaty with Hisako and outfit his people for the upcoming battle with the undead.

It was the last tab that really caught his attention. He knew that his two Scholars, Bartle and Bea, had been recruiting more researchers from amongst the villagers. He had no idea they had been so successful though. While anyone could just sit around and think, of course, the village could only progress in its technology through people that had the Research skill. Every skill level in Research meant that a person could add 0.1 Research Points to the daily village pool. Reaching higher ranks of the skill increased that.

It wasn't enough just to have the skill, however. A person had to spend at least eight hours a day trying to advance a certain tech in order to ensure that their skill would be added to the daily total. Bartle and Bea both hated research, Richter recalled with a smile. Despite that, it was clear they

hadn't been shirking their duties. The two Scholars had initially only been able to generate about four Research Points between them. They had both advanced at least one skill level in Research since coming to the village. They had also recruited enough people to almost double the number of RPs being generated in the House of Scholarship each day. Richter added the Scholars to his 'get them a fruit basket' list.

Richter reviewed the status page one more time before closing it. Then he checked his debuff icon for *Cherished Sadness*. The heart symbol that had been fully green was now half red. The timer showed he still had five hours and twenty-one minutes left until it faded completely. The effects from the pixies' Song of Honored Loss were much less powerful now, and he no longer felt such an intense ache in his chest. He actually felt a bit better than he'd expected he would. The loss of motivation was also less acute, but Richter decided to just keep lying on the ground. He listened to his people talk around him and to the soft song of the pixies. Soon he was drifting off, and with each passing second the pixies' Song continued to heal his wounded soul.

CHAPTER 19 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



“My lord.” A hand shook his shoulder lightly, and a soft voice repeated, “My lord, it is time to wake.”

Richter opened his eyes. The canopy of the Quickening was thick enough that little direct sunlight came through, but the morning was shining all around him. He blinked and focused on his chamberlain’s face. His fake face, Richter thought to himself for a moment. Then he realized, that didn’t really matter to him at all. After all, his own face was not exactly the one he’d been born with, at least on Earth. Besides, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so...good.

A quick check showed that the *Cherished Sadness* debuff had faded. He reached a hand out and Randolphus helped him to his feet. Many of the villagers were still relaxing beneath the leaves of the Quickening, but others were up and about. An easy smile found its way to his face. The pixies’ Song of Honored Loss hadn’t just helped him deal with the deaths of his

people, it also seemed to have eased the weight of the many other worries and responsibilities that had slowly been burdening his soul. He felt like he had been washed clean. Richter hadn't forgotten anything but, at least for the moment, he wasn't distracted by worries and self-recriminations. He felt... at peace.

Richter looked around. From the expressions on his people's faces, many of them felt the same way he did. He turned his attention back to his chamberlain. With a light and happy voice, he asked, "Hey man. What's going on?"

"The day is marching on, my lord. You seemed to need the rest, but now that the effect of the pixies' Song has faded, there are things I believe must be brought to your attention. The first of which is tonight's celebration."

Richter gave a carefree nod, but didn't respond immediately. He just started walking towards the Dragon's Cauldron. He was starving, but he also didn't like the fact that he had absolutely no health, stamina or mana potions in his bag. Also, he needed to know where his familiar was.

Alma? Where are you, love?

I am hunting, came the immediate reply. The dragonling sent him an aerial view of the mountains north of the village. **You slept so long,** she

sent with a bit of annoyance and more than a touch of boredom.

I needed it, he sent back in mock defense.

Hmphf, came the reply, with an insouciant hint of feminine disdain. **Would you like me to come back now? You don't need another nap?**

Just get your scaly butt back here! he sent with a laugh. **I think it's time we explore the Dungeon. Feel like a little battle?**

Mmmmm, she thought to him, a blend of excitement and hunger. Her view changed quickly as she banked and started winging back towards the village.

Richter turned his attention back Randolphus, “Now, what’s this about a party? We just buried our dead. Why would we throw a party?”

The chamberlain’s voice was more serious than Richter would have expected, “We must have a celebration tonight, my lord. What you did last night was amazing and appreciated. It was also unexpected. Most inhabitants of The Land would never expect a lord to hold a ceremony for his fallen soldiers. The fact that you took the time to do so endeared you to many of your people. Moreover, when the gnome woman challenged you, you not only addressed her question respectfully, you also reminded all present of why they should believe in both you and the village. It was a

masterful stroke.”

“That’s not why I did it,” Richter said. Definitely not the main reason anyway. His response came out a bit more harshly than he intended. He wasn’t above a bit of manipulation here and there, but it offended him that anyone would think he would use the death of his men and women as a PR tool.

“Of course, my lord,” Randolphus said readily, but he still eyed his liege’s face a moment before continuing. “It was wonderfully appreciated that you would show such concern for your people,” the chamberlain repeated. “No matter how well-received and well-intentioned however, last night was a recognition of death. What the people need and expect, Lord Richter, is a celebration of life. You have destroyed an enemy stronghold. You are a conquering lord. Even more importantly, you have protected them and their children. The army even managed to bring back treasure which will ensure the village’s future. Tonight is about reminding the people of these facts and letting them share in your glory... and a bit of the spoils. It would not be wise to take that from them, my lord.”

Richter internalized his chamberlain’s words. He did remember from history that there was always a feast after battles. It had never occurred to him that there might be a reason deeper than there was just nothing better to do than get drunk and smashed, back then. Everything Randy was saying

made sense though, “Okay, how intense should this celebration be?”

A faint smile crept onto the chamberlain’s face, “I would say the more intense the better.”

“Hmmm,” Richter responded speculatively. They had made their way to the Dragon’s Cauldron. The sunlight shone through the glass building, creating beautiful rainbows of color all around it. It was the cascade of colors that let you know the building was made of impossibly hard glass, not the fragile silica found in most window panes. He walked inside and surveyed his Core building; this was one of the tools that would make him a force to be reckoned with in The Land. Richter took in a deep breath of satisfaction and promptly fell to his knees, hacking and wheezing. Randolphus fell right behind him.

A set of shapely legs clad in brown leather rushed up to him, “My lord!” came Tabia’s muffled voice. “Let me help you.” The Alchemist’s strong arms helped both him and Randolphus out of the Cauldron. Once they were out in the clean, fresh air, Richter’s breathing began to ease and the timer next to the new icon in the corner of his vision sped up.

*You are **Choking** after exposure to an unknown caustic gas. Time left to normal breathing 00:00:03...*

A few deep breaths later, Richter was able to stand and speak, “Wha

tha fuk, Taya!” He configured his fingers and spoke a word of Power to restore the few points of health he had lost inhaling the gas. The soreness in his throat eased, so he tried again, “What the fuck, Tabia?”

The elf stood tall, the perfect picture of functional athletic muscles. She and her wife had served as mercenaries for decades, and it had left her without an ounce of fat on her supple form. Tabia’s hair fell in well-manicured dreadlocks down her back, held in place by a simple cord of brown leather. Her body was covered neck to toe in brown leather as well, including soft brown gloves. When Richter had first seen her so attired, he had asked why she was dressed for battle while in the lab. She had just given a sure and pleasing laugh, explaining that her battle leathers were much thicker. Then she had gone on to say that only a fool worked with chemical reagents without protecting one’s skin.

“I apologize for the fumes, my lord,” she said. “You need to wear one of these.” Tabia pointed to the folded cloth that was tied over her nose and mouth. “It will let you breathe the fumes without ill effect.”

“Perhaps you could let people know that before they enter the building, Alchemist Tabia,” Randolphus said with the slightest acerbic edge. Richter raised a hand to heal the chamberlain, but the man spoke his own word of Power and blue light surrounded his fingers. A moment later, his health was replenished. The chaos seed looked at him in mild surprise.

Randy just raised one sardonic eyebrow in response.

“Most know not to enter my laboratory without invitation,” she responded with a touch of heat.

This time, it was Richter’s turn to arch an eyebrow as he looked at her. Tabia quickly corrected, “Your laboratory, my lord. I meant your laboratory, of course.”

“Uh huh,” Richter said dryly. “Are those for us?” he said pointing to the white rags in her hand.

Tabia nodded and handed them both large wet handkerchiefs to wear over their noses and mouths. Then she walked back into the Cauldron. Sharing a look, then taking a deep breath, they followed her back into the glass building. Thankfully, she was right. The cloths let them breathe easily and the fumes didn’t irritate their eyes at all.

“Did you make these?” Richter asked. He didn’t know she had any Crafting skill.

“The masks are just simple fabric. It is the potion they are steeped in that is making it possible for you to breathe.” Tabia motioned to a large beaker with clear liquid and more strips of cloth in it. “This potion is known to almost every alchemist and is one of the first that alchemy students are taught to create. It filters simple smoke and noxious gases.”

“That sounds useful,” Richter said in approval. “Can you teach me?”

“Of course, my lord. It is a rudimentary formula. Please understand that it will not protect against gaseous poisons. It is already recorded whenever you wish to learn it,” she told him, gesturing to a glass cubby with three leather bound books inside. “I have been writing down every recipe I know and each that I learn as you instructed, my lord. One of the Scholars comes by every few days to copy the information. The brown is the original. The two black books are the copies.”

Richter nodded. It seemed like his village was starting to run like a well-tuned clock. He wanted a physical version of the knowledge his villagers had. It had quickly become clear to him that it was common practice in The Land to hoard information. Even when it was passed down, it often seemed to be done by oral tradition. That wasn’t what he planned to do. He wanted his people to be educated and powerful... within reason. Some information would have to be earned, and the most sensitive knowledge might have to be kept close to his chest.

Richter walked up to the cubby and placed his hand upon it. He accessed the building’s interface.

*Greetings, Master of the **Dragon’s Cauldron**. Do you wish to add a lock to this cubby? This will cost 0.5 Alteration Points, but the minimum charge is 1*

point. Currently, there are 53/100 Alteration Points available in your Core building at level one. Yes or No?

Richter frowned a moment. He changed the mental picture of what he wanted slightly and tried again.

*Greetings, Master of the **Dragon's Cauldron**. Do you wish to obscure and add locks to these four cubbies? This will cost 4 Alteration Points.*

Currently, there are 53/100 Alteration Points available in your Core building at level one. Yes or No?

Richter chose “Yes” and watched the four cabinets change. The glass took on a frosted appearance, hiding everything inside. The handles also disappeared. There didn’t appear to be any way to open the cubbies now. He placed his hand on the one he wanted to open though and received the expected prompt asking if he wanted to access the contents. The elementum chest he had made in The Forge of Heavens had the same touch interface. With a smile, he gave access to Tabia, Bartle, Bea, Sion and Randolphus.

“Keep anything sensitive or valuable in these,” he instructed his Alchemist. Richter put one of the black books in his bag. He’d study it later to learn the recipes. “Now, let me see my private stock.”

Tabia led him to a counter in the back and opened the cabinet doors. Reaching down, she pulled out a simple glass bottle and handed it to him.



<p>You have found: Harsh Moonshine</p>	<p>Alcohol Class: Common</p> <p>Alcohol Sensation: Rough</p> <p>Alcohol Strength: Blackout</p> <p>Durability: 3/3</p> <p>Weight: 1.5 kg.</p> <p>Traits: Intoxication with this alcohol will cause -2 Agility, -1 Dexterity, +15% to lyrical composition</p>
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The Cauldron had a power that increased the power of potions the longer they sat in the building. These bottles hadn't been sitting around long enough for it to kick in, unfortunately. Even without a magical boost though, he was pretty sure this hooch would make a dent in anyone that drank it. Richter summoned a mist worker and pulled out fifteen bottles of the stuff. The summoned construct formed indentations in its body that he could slip the moonshine into. In the end, it looked like a hobo's Christmas tree.

"This should help with the party tonight," he said to Randy.

"I will put these to good use," the chamberlain said, eyeing the bottles dubiously. "Geomancer Zarr is at his Trials, but I will also see if we have any untapped casks of the drink he concocted for the last celebration."

“Goatbanger?” Tabia blurted out.

“Pardon?” Randolphus asked as both men slowly turned their heads to look at the brown-skinned wood elf.

“Ah,” she began bashfully, “after the last party, I asked Zarr what he called the spell he had cast on the ale. He said it was named... Goatbanger. Apparently, he had stumbled upon the spell while experimenting with friends as a young man. The story he told me was that they finally figured out the spell and drank themselves stupid. After they were so drunk they couldn’t see straight, one of his friends tried to walk to the local brothel. He was so drunk however, that he fell over a fence into a goat pen, and...”

“Wait!” Richter called out raising a hand. “This story cannot be true.”

She leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, “I said the same thing when Zarr told it to me, my lord. The dwarf just said that was also the day they invented the phrase, ‘Ruttin on Mutton.’ His friend apparently left the village in shame, though with several goats in tow. The name of the spell stuck.”

The three of them just stood there awkwardly for a few moments. “Uhhh,” Richter began. “I’m fine with this, but let’s make sure there are two guards watching the animal pens.”

“A wise precaution, my lord,” Randolphus agreed. He wrote it down on his clipboard. Even the Spy’s cultured voice was somewhat off-kilter after Tabia’s story, but after having seen the entire village lose control the last time they drank Zarr’s enchanted brew, he was leaving nothing to chance. The chamberlain gave an order to the mist worker and it slowly started walking towards the feast area. The constructs were a common sight in the village and the cooks would know what to do with the alcohol.

Richter told Tabia to hand over any health potions she had created. After walking over to another cubby, she removed a tray that held dozens of vials of red liquid. Richter smiled when he read the prompt. The elf didn’t disappoint.

You have found: Health Potion x 50	Alchemy Class: Uncommon. Alchemy Level: Solution Alchemy Strength: Processed Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Will restore 451 Health Points over 16 seconds.
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“Tabia,” he exclaimed. “This is awesome!” He knew that she could

make five potions at a time since gaining the Talent *Additional Doses I*. One of the Cauldron's abilities also let her replicate a potion ten times with a perfect success rate. The amount of health the potion restored was a complete surprise though.

"Thank you, my lord," she replied happily. Even behind the cloth mask, he could see her smile. "After our stock was depleted because of the raid, I decided to use a few more of my Talent Points to strengthen my Alchemist Profession. I purchased *Potion Strength I* and *Healing Potion Strength I*. The first increases the strength of all my potions by 5%. The second increases the potency of my healing potions by a further 10%."

"It couldn't have been cheap," Richter said looking at the elf. Talent Points could be earned in a variety of ways, but they grew much harder to obtain as time went on.

She paused a moment, "I am happy here. It only seems right that I would use my Profession to help our people. Yesterday, the pixies' song made it hard for me to do anything but lie down. After half the time on the debuff had elapsed however, I found I could muster the will to move again. More than that, I felt inspired to help you and the village however I could. I am still alive after all, when so many fell in the battle. Once I felt up to moving again, I came back to the Cauldron, purchased the Talents and finished brewing the health potions. We are all in this together, after all, my

lord.”

Richter blinked. Tabia had never caused problems in the village, but neither had she ever been warm and cuddly. She’d always come off as exactly what she was, a coldly rational mercenary. He had to imagine that there were other areas in her Profession she could have invested her precious Talent Points into that would have served her better personally. Instead of being selfish, she’d done the opposite.

The elf had acted somewhat selflessly and purchased a Talent that might save the lives of her fellow villagers. Richter remembered the words that had accompanied the new ranks of Morale and Loyalty for the village: *‘You can expect small gifts from time to time,’* and *‘Your people will... begin to put the well-being of the settlement above their own.’* When he remembered that, it all started to make sense. A smile broke across his face. He loved The Land!

Randolphus and Tabia watched him just stand there and think for a few seconds. The cloth made it only slightly less creepy that he was staring at the elf with a doofy smile on his face. He finally caught the hint that he was making her uncomfortable when Randolphus fake coughed. Richter shook himself out of it. “If the potions went so well, then what’s with all this killer smoke?”

“This is just the byproduct of a failed experiment, my lord,” Tabia replied, waving her hand dismissively.

Richter’s amusement faded and he blanched slightly. Her last “experiment” had involved trying to stabilize the equivalent of magical nitroglycerin. She had ultimately been successful, but there had been several failed attempts. Failed attempts that had shook the very ground the village was built upon and made the village dogs yap themselves into little doggy seizures. When he had asked her about those experiments, she had just smiled ruefully and said she was thankful that the building was both self-healing and made of one of the hardest known substances. He had made a prompt life decision to *not* be around the Cauldron while she was experimenting from that moment on.

Perpetually uninterested in a man’s blood flow, the lesbian elf failed to notice her liege’s red-faced apprehension. Instead, she just slid over two full trays of potions.

You have found: Stamina Potion x 36	Alchemy Class: Uncommon. Alchemy Level: Solution Alchemy Strength: Processed Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg.
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	Traits: Will restore 384 Stamina Points over 18 seconds.
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You have found: Mana Potion x 42	Alchemy Class: Uncommon. Alchemy Level: Solution Alchemy Strength: Processed Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Will restore 287 Mana Points over 17 seconds.
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Richter had no idea why it was harder to restore mana than stamina or health. It was that way even for his enchantments. The magic rings he had found that boosted health, stamina and mana might have the same class and quality, but the boost to mana was always less. Health and stamina seemed to rise equally.

“This is great, Tabia,” Richter told her thankfully, “but why aren’t there fifty of each?”

She sighed. “The sad fact is that we are out of resources, my lord.”

“Out?” Richter asked, surprised.

He looked at Randolphus who readily spoke up, “I have asked Alchemist Tabia for more detailed reports of what ingredients and potions she has, but she has been less than forthcoming.”

Richter knew Randy had nothing against Tabia, but the elf really did view the Dragon’s Cauldron as her own little fiefdom. Randolphus, in turn, may have been lying about the fact that he was a half-undine Spy, but he had never hidden the fact that he was also a fastidious prick. Tabia’s lack of compliance with his documentation requests and her indignation at having him in “her” lab had caused the two of them to be a bit prickly with one another.

For his own part, the chaos seed sympathized with Tabia. He had wanted to scream a time or two after being subjected to Randolphus’ to-do lists. In fact, he had screamed once. But even though paperwork wasn’t his thing, he did greatly appreciate the chamberlain’s attention to detail. The man had at his fingertips information ranging from average water consumption to how many kernels of grain the village had. It had driven the chamberlain crazy for months that Tabia wouldn’t let him snoop in the Cauldron and wasn’t the best at providing accurate reports.

“I am too busy serving Lord Richter and the village to give you updates every hour for your little ledger,” the elf responded archly.

“My ledger,” Randolphus retorted, “keeps this village running smoothly, and there is nothing little about it!”

“Did I say ledger, I meant-”

“Enough!” Richter said, not even trying to keep a smirk off his face. “Tabia, what exactly did you mean by ‘we are out’?”

“There are always more resources, my lord, but it takes time to collect and prepare them. Arrowroot, for example, is plentiful in the forest and grows well in Isabella’s garden, but it must be properly dried first in order to make high quality stamina potions.”

“Then dry some,” Richter told her, his tone indicating the idea was the most obvious thing in the world.

“We have no more *fresh* arrowroot,” she answered primly. *Her* tone made it obvious just what she thought about *his* tone. “More will grow soon, but since you have stopped everyone from going past the village walls, the flow of herbs from the forest has stopped. If you want the production of potions to resume I will need more. I made a list,” the last word was said with a bit of emphasis and her eyes flicked to Randolphus, “of what we will need at a bare minimum.”

Richer looked at the list. His eyes widened slightly when a prompt filled his vision.

You have been offered a Quest: **Needed Ingredients I**

The prodigious rate at which your Core building, the Dragon's Cauldron, can create potions is both a blessing and a curse. More ingredients are needed to continue producing the potions you require.

Success Conditions:

The minimum requirements to fulfill this quest are:

- 1) 500 Arrowroot Plants or an equivalent that can restore stamina
- 2) 500 Forest Sage Plants or an equivalent that can restore health
- 3) 500 Speckled Mountain Flowers or an equivalent that can restore mana.

Reward: Resumption of normal production in the Dragon's Cauldron

Penalty for Failure:

- 1) Decreased relationship with Tabia.
- 2) Continued decreased potion production.

This Quest is a charge from one of your villagers and cannot be refused.

“Five hundred? Of each?” Richter asked incredulously. “And this is the bare minimum you need?”

“Yes, my lord,” Tabia answered earnestly. “The Cauldron's

replication ability is amazing, but it doesn't diminish the amount of resources required. When you left for the raid on the goblin camp, you took our entire stock of potions. Few raw materials were left. If I don't get these ingredients immediately, there will not be enough potions for the next large engagement. When will that be by the way, my lord?"

Richter gave a large sigh before answering. He had planned to have a talk with the village leadership that night, but now that they were throwing a party, he had decided to push it to the next morning. Since she was asking though, he outlined the undead threat. He quickly told her about the undead lair he had found and the memory he had lived through. Richter spoke of the lich lord that had spotted him somehow, and Hisako's theory that the increased undead sightings around the village were harbingers of something worse to come. Finally, he told her about the time limit to use Krista's Summoning Coin, and how there were only nine days left before they would have to fight the lich without the spirit's support.

Tabia's eyes had widened while he spoke, but upon hearing that she had at most a week to make more potions, she cursed, "I need these supplies immediately, my lord!"

Richter's mind began to spin as he tried to figure out how to fulfill such an order, when Randolphus spoke up, "If I may, my lord, I believe the meidon sprites would be ideal for this assignment. It will allow them to take

their pixies into the forest and gain some experience. Whereas hunters we send might ruin the plants, almost all sprites have the Herb Lore skill, I believe. I am sure that Hisako's army would be happy to help as well if offered a small portion of the potions that will be made."

The chamberlain's suggestion was a good one. If the pixies were truly going into battle in a week's time, then it would be a good idea for them to get some experience first. With any luck, a few might even level. The fact that both sprites and pixies were so attuned to the forest was also an amazing bonus. Richter well remembered how difficult it was to harvest his first herbs. Without the Herb Lore skill and the proper technique, it was damn near impossible.

"I like it," Richter said. He sent out a mental call to Futen. "Is there anything else you need?"

The alchemist cocked her head in thought, "I actually have a few ideas for potions that might work well against the undead. I should be able to make a few with the ingredients I have on hand."

Tabia fixed her gaze back on Richter and spoke warmly, "I want to express that I appreciate what you said last night. I know you spoke the truth because you have already made it possible for Mimi and me to live in a safe place. We might never have gone for our Trials without you and the security

you provide. I am with you, my lord, and I will continue to sing your praises. I am happy to tell you that the other villagers I have recruited to help me in the Cauldron are already excited about the possibilities here. If you continue to bring me any interesting ingredients you find, I am sure we will be able to make you some amazing potions. We will even make them with a smile on our faces.” Her eyes twinkled as she finished her speech.

Another window opened in Richter’s vision.

You earned an **Open Quest: Ingredients for Love!**

Alchemist Tabia is extremely appreciative of what you have done for the village and for her personally. She promises to do what she can to further improve your relationship with any villagers that possess the Alchemy skill. She also states she will investigate potential new potion recipes if new ingredients are brought to her.

Success Conditions: Bring new ingredients to Tabia

Reward: New Potions

Fail Conditions: This quest will only remain available while the village Loyalty and Morale both remain rank 3 or above.

Penalty for Failure: None

This Quest is a charge from one of your villagers and cannot be refused.

Richter had to stifle another creepy grin. An *open* quest? The holy grail and ultimate cheat for any game! All he had to do to make every alchemist in the village love him was to keep bringing new ingredients to the Cauldron. He told Tabia that he would take care of it. By that time, most of the fumes had cleared. They removed their handkerchiefs and Richter filled several vials with the solution in the bowl that held the strips of cloth.

You have found: Basic Cleansing Potion x 7	Alchemy Class: Common. Alchemy Level: Tincture Alchemy Strength: Processed Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Will filter the air you breathe of common fumes.
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Richter also asked Tabia for one measure of every ingredient she had. She looked at him quizzically but agreed. Soon his Bag was full of various herbs: Tiger Lily, Arrowroot, Forest Sage, and other more valuable components like Crypt Mistress Ichor, Spectral Dust and Dire Wasp Venom. Richter truly regretted not having had more of the shriek venom to feed the

Dungeon. It was an incredibly potent weapon and had helped him in more than one battle, but because it was a naturally occurring venom, the Dragon's Cauldron couldn't reproduce it. He'd used the last of it to kill the assengai spider queen. The idea of the Dungeon making it a loot drop was insanely attractive.

Tabia asked why he needed one measure of each ingredient, but he just smiled and told her it would be made clear soon enough. The two men left the Cauldron and the elf got back to her alchemy.

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Randolphus also had them stop by the garden to retrieve some living plants before they left the meadow.

“We already have a dried measure of most of these,” Richter commented. “Why are we uprooting plants?”

“You plan to place those ingredients in the Dungeon’s Well of Offering, my lord?”

“Yes,” Richter replied. The village knew about the Dungeon, or would soon, but he wasn’t sure how he was going to handle their access to it. That was why he hadn’t told Tabia why he wanted the plants. Until he had a policy in place, he wanted to keep information about it curtailed to avoid an annoying bumrush.

“Prepared ingredients will be treated like an item or loot,” the chamberlain explained. “There is a chance of being rewarded with these items after slaying monsters or finding chests. If you offer the Dungeon

living plants, however, there is a chance they will start to grow naturally.”

One of the gardeners walked up with a smile on his face. Richter told him to gather up one of each plant in the garden, roots and all. The man lightly placed a fist to his heart in salute of his liege and called the other gardeners to do as commanded. Richter turned to his new Companion, “So it doubles the chances of finding them? The Dungeon will make more?”

“Not exactly, my lord,” the chamberlain hedged. “Seeing as how we have a few moments, I will explain a bit of Lore. Dungeons do not ‘want,’ my lord. They have Motivations. These Motivations will determine how the Dungeon develops.”

“You kinda lost me, man.”

Randolphus frowned slightly, “I will... endeavor to find you, my lord. An example of a Motivation might be to connect to water. This would be completely understandable if the monster type of the Dungeon were plant-based. In that scenario, the growth of the Dungeon’s tunnels will be towards a water source. Why this matters to a Dungeon Master such as yourself is that it can help predict the Dungeon’s progression. Imagine that the closest water source was a mile deep. The tunnels it created would go almost straight down. That is why the choice of Harbinger and Item of Power are so important. The wrong choice might lead to a Dungeon whose Motivations

were horribly mismatched with its environment.”

Richter’s heart started to race, “Yeah, sooooo, what about a Beast Dungeon in a forest?”

“I believe that is entirely appropriate, my lord,” Randolphus assured him.

Whew, Richter thought. He plastered a smile on his face and shrugged nonchalantly, “I knew that, of course. So, the Harbinger and the Item of Power determine the Motivations?”

“The source of Motivations is as hard to fathom as the beginning of love or the ending of hate.” Richter rolled his eyes a bit, but didn’t interrupt. “The fulfillment of Motivations is as definable as the end of the night sky,” Randolphus’ voice had the tone of recitation and just a hint of irritation at the end, having caught his liege’s eye movement. Richter opened his mouth to complain about useless poetry, but the chamberlain cut him off, “It basically means Motivations can be anything and it doesn’t always have to make sense.”

A broad smile broke across Richter’s face, “Now was that so hard?”

A faint smile creased the Spy’s face in spite of himself, “Merely endeavoring not to ‘lose’ you again, my lord. I do know one thing for certain. While Motivations can be extremely varied, the primary Motivation

of every new Dungeon is to connect to the Labyrinth.”

“I thought Dungeons were already part of the Labyrinth,” Richter protested. The all-too-familiar ‘quit confusing me with this doubletalk bullshit’ headache was looming on the horizon.

“The Labyrinth is all Dungeons, but not all Dungeons are of the Labyrinth,” Randolphus said in the same recitational voice. Seeing Richter’s nostrils flare dangerously, he cut to the chase again, “Anyone traveling through the Labyrinth might find your Dungeon, but you cannot use this Dungeon to enter the Labyrinth until it reaches level ten.”

“Well, that’s not fair,” Richter said in a mock whine.

Not getting the dry humor, Randolphus just decided to agree with his strange liege, “No, my lord, it is not. As I told you last night, new Dungeons are quite susceptible to destruction until they mature, or at the very least, your position as Dungeon Master remains precarious. That is why it is important that we strengthen it as soon as possible.

“In Law, there are multiple entrances to their Dungeon. Each is closely regulated by the crown. The king takes a large percentage of whatever treasure the Adventurers find. It is also true however, that a great deal of new Adventurers lose their lives. This also benefits the crown by feeding the Dungeon.”

“It kind of sounds like a bad deal for the Adventurers,” Richter noted.

“That is only because you do not know everything that a Dungeon offers, my lord. Even with the heavy tax of the crown, and the portion that Adventurers give to their guild, one successful Dungeon dive can give someone enough to live on for weeks or months. There is also the possibility of finding powerful items. The Dungeon is a powerful draw for the poor and destitute.”

Richter nodded in understanding. It always came down to money and power, “So the King gets people to mine his Dungeon for him, both for loot and resources, takes a big cut, and if it gets rid of some beggars...”

“That is why entrance to the Dungeon is free, my lord,” the chamberlain said nodding. “Each death helps it grow in power, making the level of loot and magic even better for the nobles and the King. It also serves to reduce the population of ‘undesirables,’ as the new King calls them. The old King wouldn’t let anyone with a low level or without combat skills into the Dungeon, but now it is open to all.”

One thing didn’t make sense to Richter, “How does everyone get in? Only people I give permission to can pass through the snake mouth.” Futen floated up before Randolphus could answer. Richter gave quick orders for the orb to find Sion and have him send the meidon sprites out with their

pixies to gather herbs from the forest. He also told the remnant to have Sion and Terrod meet him at the village gate. Futen voiced assent in his monotone voice and floated off again.

“You could easily set the permission of the Dungeon to allow entrance to any and all, my lord. The only reason there is any impediment to entry at the present time is because you are the Dungeon Master. The Hall of Elemental Hunters has had no Master for many centuries. Though the King regulates entry by force of arms, no king of Yves has ever been a Dungeon Master.

“Many do not know this, as the Dungeon predates the city of Law. The first King of Yves was merely a warlord who happened to find the Hall and the Place of Power it rests upon. He found the Heart Crystal which let him bind his bloodline to the Place of Power, but the Dungeon Heart was never found. It is rumored that it is hidden somewhere within the Hall of Elemental Hunters, and that if found it could grant mastery of the Dungeon, but none know for sure. Countless generations of the royal family,” he paused a moment before correcting himself, “of my family, have searched the Dungeon, but it has never been located. Without a Master, anyone and everyone can enter and exit the Hall.”

“And Law isn’t worried about the Dungeon being used to bring a hostile army right into the city because...”

“‘Dungeons are for adventure, not war’,” Randolphus finished with a smile. “Now you see the importance of that truth. Rather than being feared, the few Adventurers that have established Node Roads to other major settlements grow rich just by charging exorbitant fees to transport materials and messages.”

Richter took a moment to absorb everything he had just been told. While he did, the gardeners walked up periodically and handed him plants. He absently summoned more mist workers to hold them. The chaos seed considered placing the plants in his Bag of Holding, but it wasn't a viable option. The weight wasn't an issue. With thirty-three points of Strength, he could carry up to three hundred and thirty kilos. Coupled with his bag's truly magical 90% weight reduction, he could carry over three tons. Still, there were only four hundred slots in his bag and some items took up several spaces each.

After he had loaded up the first mist worker, he turned to Randolphus again, “Alright, so we already agreed not to feed our people to the Dungeon. I still need other options to make it grow strong as fast as possible.”

“There are several ways.” Randolphus reassured him. “One, you already know that the Dungeon will generate a certain amount of Dungeon Points each day. Some of these will be allocated to leveling. Two, I have read that they can attract monsters of whatever type the Dungeon specializes

in. This did not affect the Hall in Yves both because it is in the middle of a city and because the monster type is an elemental class. You mentioned that the Dungeon would be populated by a beast. Specifically which type, my lord?”

“The Harbinger is my old pet, the shale adder. The battle with the goblins changed it into a Chaotic reptile, whatever that means.”

“Reptile beasts, then,” Randolphus said nodding.

“Actually,” Richter answered, “the prompt said that because of my Limitless ability, the dungeon could be populated by any animal or any beast.”

The chamberlain’s mouth dropped open in shock. When he closed it a faint smile of disbelief was on his face, “You may get tired of hearing this, my lord, but your ability is astounding. The implications of this...” He trailed off as he started considering them.

“Randy... Randy!” he repeated with a little more force. As Randolphus came back to himself, “You gotta stop phasing out on me. You do know that is super-annoying, right? Now, what implications?”

“I apologize, my lord. The first thing that occurred to me was that the number of dangerous beasts in your lands is about to drop. If what I read about the Dungeon consuming monsters is true, then your domain will

become safer. At least in regard to beast or animal attacks,” Randolphus clarified, “which the reports from our hunters indicate is the majority of what they encounter. The Dungeon will begin to consume them both for energy and so that it can learn to spawn them in its depths.”

Hmmm, Richter thought. That was a fairly large consequence. There were other monsters in his domain, but as they were living in a forest, most were classified as beasts. If Randolphus was right, the Dungeon eating a large amount of the predators around the village might make it safe enough for his noncombatants to start ranging outside the walls again. It also meant that the Dungeon should have a steady diet of monsters to feed upon and could grow in level fairly quickly.

Richter’s mind continued to work, and a troubling thought occurred to him, “If the beasts are consumed by the Dungeon, does that mean that there will be a rise in the other types of monsters that appear around the village?” His medical mind was at work. Everyone thought antibacterial soap was a good thing, but they didn’t factor in that humans had evolved to have a symbiotic relationship with some bacteria. Killing those bacteria just left room for dangerous bacteria to move in and take up shop. MRSA sounded like woosah, but it wasn’t nearly as tranquil.

Attacks by the undead were already on the rise. True, both he and Hisako thought that was because of the eldritch master, and he planned to

challenge the lich in only a few days, but it wasn't a sure thing that killing the creature would stop the monsters. The Land was a magical world, but it still operated based on logic. If the Dungeon removed one part of his forest's ecology, the beast predators, it only made sense to him that another type of predator would fill that niche. He explained his reasoning to the chamberlain.

"I suppose that is possible," Randolphus replied, stroking his well-manicured beard. "Monsters do not just appear out of thin air, however, at least not outside of a Dungeon. They come from dens, nests or lairs, or migrate in from other areas. In the first scenario, we will simply need to clear the monsters out of whatever hole they have found. This would not be overly different from the current situation." Richter nodded. Finding dens, the larger nests, and the more dangerous lairs the nests developed into was one of the main reasons that the guards and hunters patrolled the land around the village. A swarm of monsters was the immediate danger that the village faced. The mists had, so far at least, protected them from more 'civilized' enemies.

"In the second migratory scenario," Randolphus continued, "the monsters will slowly be infiltrating the region. As long as they are dealt with soon after they enter our lands, it should not be anything the village cannot handle. The Dungeon consuming the beasts in the area should make your

people much safer, my lord!” The chamberlain had a happy grin on his face.

“Or,” Richter began, and Randolphus’ smile began to slip, “it means I can finally unlock my third power.” So far, he had been able to unlock two of his four powers, Air and Life. Each unlocked power increased his spell strength in those types of magic by 50%, while at the same time giving him a 50% resistance as well. Even more importantly, it unlocked the bonuses of Mastery.

His Air Mastery gave him the *Fast Learner* ability, which meant his skills improved 30% faster than normal. Coupled with his Limitless ability and the nearly endless battles he had been engaged in, it was why he had been able to progress so far so fast. Most of his ranks were still just *novice* and *initiate*, but even that was astounding considering the fact that he had only been in The Land for half a year.

The bonus from his Life Mastery, Bounty of Life, was even more powerful. It increased the growth of his village by 30%. The Hearth Tree was built upon the same type of ley line and the tree had grown larger than most skyscrapers on Earth. When you added in the bonuses that the Quickening provided, his settlement was a rocket shooting upward. All the village needed was time and safety and he knew it could become the stuff of legend.

Still, there were two other powers he had yet to unlock, Dark and Water magic. The Water Mastery ability, Tranquil Soul, would be of immense personal use. It would decrease the casting cost of every one of his spells by 30%. Spells of the *initiate* rank cost substantially more to cast than *novice* level spells, and saving nearly a third of his mana per casting would make him considerably more dangerous.

That alone might not be enough reason for him to awaken his next power though. The downside of awakening his Powers was that it affected the magical fabric of The Land. Each unlocked Power increased the ambient magic of his domain, which in turn attracted stronger enemies. If Randolphus was right, the Dungeon would consume monsters in the area. Awakening another Power would make his domain even more dangerous than it was now, however. A third Mastery would not only attract more monsters, it would mean more formidable ones with higher levels.

The perk of Dark magic was what he was really thinking about. Hidden Treasures increased the yield of any treasures and loot he obtained by 30%. Coupled with his new Mark, Blood and Chaos, that would greatly increase his chances of finding truly amazing gear. Now that the Dungeon was literally on his doorstep, the Dark ability would basically increase the influx into his economy by 30%. The raid on the goblins had shown him the importance of having gold in his war chest. The ship Shiovana had been

working on would also be ready soon, opening the village to trade. For the type of magical items and resources Richter wanted to buy, his treasury could soon be depleted.

Perhaps even more compelling was the possibility that he might find another Magic Core. Richer had no idea why so many Cores were scattered around his lands. Apparently, they were supposed to be harder to find than lotion at a boys' camp. They were even more rare than finding a Place of Power. Whatever the reason, he was two for two when he had unlocked his Powers. He already had a firm idea of what he would use his next Core to build. There was no denying that The Forge of Heavens and The Dragon's Cauldron were the biggest force multipliers in his village.

Unlocking another Power would probably even help his Dungeon. Right now, the Dungeon Points it generated every day were increased by 200%. One hundred came from his Air Power and one hundred from his Life Power. It only made sense that unlocking another Power would further increase the bonus.

Yes, he had a great deal to think about.

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The gardeners finished bringing over the plants. Richter had to summon another three mist workers to carry them. One of the gardeners brought something wrapped in a sodden blanket. He explained that it contained a shiverleaf frond, the main ingredient in the Potion Selak's Luck. Apparently, the silver plant did not react well to sunlight. Richter thanked him and started walking down toward the village. Randolphus followed close behind him.

They stopped by the Forge of Heavens and Richter grabbed one ingot of each metal the village possessed: iron, steel, high steel, moonstone, cobalt, quicksilver and elementum. There were only eight bars of elementum left and it hurt Richter's "frugal" soul to think about literally throwing one down a well, but it was the only realistic way that he could think of to get more. Apparently, elementum wasn't even naturally occurring on this plane of existence. It was a "fey" metal, whatever the hell that meant.

He'd once hoped to use the transmutation property of The Dragon's Cauldron to yield more of the clear green metal, but the conversion rate was astronomical. To make even one cobalt ingot required more than a hundred thousand iron ingots to be sacrificed. When you factored in that elementum was more powerful and rare than cobalt, obtaining the metal that way just wasn't a realistic option.

Richter also placed some unsmelted ore in his bag. If he understood the earlier prompts correctly, offering the metal ingots would make it possible to gain the same back as loot. If he wanted the Dungeon to "grow" more metal in the form of mineable veins, he needed the metals in their raw form. Unfortunately, the only ores he had access to were iron, copper and moonstone.

An iron mine had been found early on after settling in the area, and a small vein of copper had been found within it. The only reason he had access to moonstone was that he'd found a mound of it randomly out in the forest. There hadn't been much, but Richter still wondered if the reason there had been any at all was because of one of the level two perks of the Quickening; a 25% increase in the chance of finding rare resources.

Richter also took the time to try and make the central anvil learn the enchantments from the captured goblin weapons. Ideally, he liked to drink a Potion of Selak's Luck before doing this, but he had precious few left. It

took a full five days for Tabia to make more, and there was always a significant chance that her attempt to brew it would fail. That meant a loss of time and possibly resources. So, for now, it fell to his natural Luck, which at twenty-five still made him luckier than any man on Earth. It was his own theory, but from what he could gauge, most Earth humans had attributes between ten and twenty, ten being low average and twenty putting them at Olympian level.

Unfortunately, the lack of extra luck was telling. Of the three items, the High Steel Goblin Cleaver +2, the Orichalum Round Shield of Rust, and the High Steel War Hammer of Soul Trap, only the second was absorbed by the Forge of Heavens. A new floating green light appeared in the central anvil, waiting to be learned. The loss of the other two was a bit of a disappointment, but he couldn't win them all.

After Richter outfitted himself with two bundles of arrows, the two Companions left the Forge. Alma was apparently in a playful mood, because she had perched on top of the building and swooped down to blow a gust of air into Richter's ear as they exited the Forge. She trumpeted her successful attack after he exclaimed "Gah!" She decided to float along above him after he glared daggers at her. Randolphus hid a small smile, the consummate professional. Soon the sound of hammering faded behind them and they were at the gate, where Sion and Terrod were waiting. The sprite's bonded

pixie, Sapir, was flying around them. Upon seeing Alma, the young flyer gave a whoop of glee and began chasing the dragonling through the air.

“My lord,” Terrod greeted him, placing a fist to his chest.

Sion repeated the gesture, but with much more snap, coming sharply to attention. Richter furrowed his brow at his friend, until, with his fist still on his chest, Sion extended his middle finger and adopted a sardonic expression. The chaos seed rolled his eyes. Sometimes he regretted teaching his best friend so many Earth swear words and insults.

“Your little floating light told us to meet you here, and to be well-armed,” Sion remarked. “What are we getting into this time? Stealing eggs from a harpy’s nest? Water-wrestling a leviathan?”

“Exploring our Dungeon,” Richter said with a smile. Sion smiled back and Terrod’s eyes widened slightly.

“Is it true then, my lord?” the captain asked. “Have you truly brought a Dungeon to the village?” His voice was a mixture of awe and excitement.

Richter winced slightly. Apparently gossip flowed faster than curry through a baby. He realized it had been unrealistic to think that everyone wouldn’t already know about the Dungeon. After all, hundreds of refugees had appeared at the same time as the Dungeon, and every guard that had remained in the village had marched up the hill to escort the freed prisoners

into the village. Would have been good if he could have kept a lid on it for at least a couple days though, he thought ruefully. He brought the grin back to his face, “It is true, Terrod, and I’m taking my Companions with me when I go in. Which brings me to the next thing I need to tell you.”

He gestured to Randolphus and said, “He is my new Companion.” Richter had been debating on whether to share any of the chamberlain’s backstory with Sion and Terrod. He had ultimately decided to just keep his yap shut. Randy was no fool, and he would trust the man to disclose information if and when he felt it was appropriate.

Sion and Terrod both shared a look before each extending their hands to Randolphus. The sprite held on a bit longer than necessary and stared the chamberlain in the eyes. “You would not have become Richter’s Companion unless your paths aligned. Will you be able to handle yourself in battle, however?” Terrod nodded, having wondered the same thing. Just because Richter was a Companion to each of them did not mean they had any tie to each other. They could not, for instance, read each other’s status pages.

Terrod and Sion had proven their prowess to each other in war and had fought back-to-back. The two men trusted one another. Randolphus, on the other hand, was just Richter’s bookish chamberlain. They were understandably concerned about doing a Dungeon dive with him.

Randolphus looked at Richter, but the chaos seed just raised his eyebrows. The meaning was clear. It was up to the chamberlain to decide what to say. The Spy took a deep breath, and told them, “My duties for the late King were more than just administrative. I have some skill in Stealth, Small Blades and Water Magic. I promise you that I will be able to take care of myself.” So saying, he removed his robe. The other three men’s eyes all widened in shock.

Randolphus was covered neck to toe in leather armor. It was a red color, so dark it was almost black. It was well-worn and scored, but was otherwise in good condition. The leather had small knobs on it from whatever creature it had been made from, and the strips were banded, fitting Randolphus like a second skin. Dark metal nubs dotted his gauntlets, obviously able to do some damage in hand-to-hand combat. What was really striking however, were the knives. The man was bristling with blades!

A bandolier of throwing daggers hung across Randy’s chest like a sash, holding a dozen razor-sharp knives. A long dagger extended out of his left boot, while two more stuck out from his belt on the right. A heavy blade was affixed to his armor horizontally at the small of his back, an easy draw for his left hand. His armament was completed by a black whip coiled on his left hip.

The chamberlain’s gear practically hummed with magic and Richter’s

identification Talent triggered:

Ember Scourge Chestplate of Vibrant Elemental Absorption	Defense: +21 Durability: 61/61 Item Class: Rare Quality: Masterwork Type: Light Armor Weight: 7.4 kg Traits: 1) Up to 7% of any Fire, Water, Earth or Air damage received is partially absorbed and converted to Health. 2) +7% Fire Resistance to area covered by item Enchantment Rank: 5 Enchantment Level: 1
Ember Scourge Bracers of Poison Resistance	Defense: +13 Durability: 35/36 Item Class: Scarce Quality: Exquisite Weight: 4.2 kg

	<p>Traits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) General Poison resistance of 15%. Only works on poisons equal to or less than <i>Solution</i> level and/or <i>Fortified</i> strength. 2) +7% Fire Resistance to area covered by item <p>Enchantment Rank: 4</p> <p>Enchantment Level: 1</p>
<p>Ember Scourge</p> <p>Greaves of Earth Resistance</p>	<p>Defense: +13</p> <p>Durability: 35/36</p> <p>Item Class: Scarce</p> <p>Quality: Exquisite</p> <p>Weight: 4.2 kg</p> <p>Traits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) +11% Earth Resistance to area covered by item 2) +7% Fire Resistance to area covered by item <p>Enchantment Rank: 4</p> <p>Enchantment Level: 1</p>
Studded Ember	Defense: +11

Scourge Gauntlets of Fire Strike	Durability: 56/56 Item Class: Scarce Quality: Exquisite Weight: 2.5 kg Traits: <div> 1) Unarmed combat strikes add +12-13 Fire damage. Up to +7% chance to cause <i>Burn</i> 2) +7% Fire Resistance to area covered by item </div> Charges: 348/348 Enchantment Rank: 5 Enchantment Level: 1
Ember Scourge Leggings of Air Resistance	Defense: +14 Durability: 67/67 Item Class: Scarce Quality: Exquisite Weight: 3.8 kg Traits: <div> 1) +17% Air Resistance to area covered by item 2) +7% Fire Resistance to area covered by item </div>

	Enchantment Rank: 6 Enchantment Level: 1
Ember Scourge Boots of Quick Movement	Defense: +12 Durability: 46/46 Item Class: Scarce Quality: Exquisite Weight: 2.2 kg Traits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) +11% Movement Speed 2) +7% Fire Resistance to area covered by item Enchantment Rank: 4 Enchantment Level: 1

Even as Richter watched, Randolphus shoved his robe into the bag at his side and pulled out a helmet. Richter was momentarily confused at how the small bag could hold so much, then the obvious clicked in his mind. His chamberlain had a Bag of Holding! Richter used his Talent on it as well. The weight reduction was only 23%, and the grid was only 14x14, but it was definitely a dimensional bag.

The chamberlain's helmet completed the set and showed the bonus from having a matching set.

Ember Scourge Helmet of Perception	Defense: +12 Durability: 42/42 Item Class: Scarce Quality: Exquisite Weight: 2.0 kg Traits: <div><div>1) Increases Perception by +14</div><div>2) +7% Fire Resistance to area covered by item</div></div> Enchantment Rank: 5 Enchantment Level: 1
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This is an entire set of matched armor: **Ember Scourge**. This armor was made of the skin of a powerful Fire elemental.

Match Bonus: Defense +25%.

This suit of armor was specifically tailored for **Ran'dolphinius the Half-Undine**.

Tailored Bonus: Defense +25%.

Material Bonus: +20% Fire Resistance

Entire Set is **Soul Bound** (Level 2)

“Goddamn, man!” Richter exclaimed. The armor gave better defense than his own! The Enhanced Sprite Armor was the most powerful light armor he had come across, until now. In addition to its inherent high defense, it had been masterfully sculpted to fit Randolphus. That, plus the fact that it was a matching set, increased the defense of each piece by +50%. That prompted a quick question because he always thought the fitted bonus was only 10%. The chamberlain told him that the Smith Profession had Talents that could increase that value. The royal armorer of Yves had apparently been extremely Talented.

Richter just shook his head and went back to marveling at the high defense. His own elementum blade only had a damage of thirty-one to thirty-three points of damage, which meant the chamberlain’s armor was almost a match. Seeing Randolphus’ defense was a good reminder that his own weapons weren’t exactly the trump card he often thought of them as.

Each piece was also heavily enchanted. Even with the Forge of Heavens, Richter had only reached rank four in one of his enchantments, *Freeze*. The rank of an enchantment basically made it stronger. Rank one of

Freeze added one point of damage and gave a 1% chance to immobilize an enemy with ice. Rank four increased that to four points of damage and a 4% chance per hit at baseline.

The enchantments were all level one, but that didn't take away from the impressiveness of the armor. Richter hadn't come across any level two enchantments yet, though his Specialty, Essence Enchanter, allowed him to evolve his own unlocked enchantments. He had to funnel his own mana into doing so, however, and the costs could be prohibitive. In fact, the only enchantment he had unlocked so far was *Sonic Damage, level 1*.

The first level of *Sonic Damage* had cost twenty-seven hundred mana to unlock. The cost was determined by multiplying the spell cost of twenty-seven mana by one hundred. Thanks to his high Wisdom and Ring of Flowing Thought, his mana regen was a respectable 32.4 MP/min. Richter had been able to unlock level one in a day by channeling the runoff from his mana pool once it was full.

Richter had been pleased and surprised to find that after unlocking level one of the enchantment he was given the opportunity to unlock its second level as well. The chaos seed had become somewhat less pleased to discover that the next level was a full hundred times more expensive than the first, at two hundred and seventy thousand mana points.

He had been funneling his mana into the second level of the enchantment for thirty days. If he had done nothing else besides try and unlock level two of *Sonic Damage* then he would have been done after a week. That was not the case, however. Between battle, training, summoning mist workers, and countless other reasons, the mana he had been able to allocate to the enchantment had been a trickle rather than a steady flow. That was why he was so surprised when he checked on the progress.

You know the enchantment **Sonic Damage, Level 1, Rank 3**

Enchantment Size: 3

Enchantment School: Earth

Effect 1: *Increased Damage* – Each rank increases weapon damage by +1.

Effect 2: *Disarm* – When triggered, opponents may lose their weapon.

+1% chance per rank. Higher rank also increases the likelihood of weapon loss.

You are attempting to learn the enchantment **Sonic Damage, Level 2**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Earth

You are currently at 258,147/270,000 for the mana cost to learn this

enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

He was almost there. Only a few thousand mana points away from having a level two enchantment! Soon, the size and effects would be filled in, he thought with excitement. The enchantment size let him know how many Soul Points were required for each rank of the enchantment. Rank one of *Sonic Damage, level 1* cost three Soul Points, rank two cost six points, rank three cost twelve, etc.

He was hoping that level two of the enchantment not only increased the previous effects but also didn't have too high of a cost. Even if the effects were twice as powerful, if the cost tripled it might still be better to use level one of *Sonic Damage*. He'd have to wait and see, but thankfully, not too much longer.

Richter had turned off the auto-channeling of his mana into the enchantment before the goblin raid. It wasn't worth risking going into that battle with anything less than his full mana pool. Now though, he accessed the interface again.

*Currently you are allocating 0% of your mana regeneration to purchasing **Sonic Damage, Level 2**. Do you wish to increase this? Current mana pool*

regen rate is 5.4 mana:10 seconds. Yes or No?

Richter exerted his will and was rewarded with another prompt.

*Currently you are allocating 100% of your mana regeneration once your mana pool reaches 650 mana points to purchasing **Sonic Damage, Level 2.***

Mana still required: 11,853

He did some quick calculations and realized that was less than 25% of the mana he could generate in a day. Even subtracting the MPs, he would probably use in the Dungeon, he should be done tomorrow. Richter couldn't wait! He had no idea what his level two enchantment would bring, but he was sure it would be amazing. Increasing the rank of an enchantment was like training an animal to be stronger and faster. Increasing the level, on the other hand, was more like transforming a monkey into a gorilla. Feeling like a kid on Christmas Eve, he turned his attention back to examining the rest of Randolphus' items.

The fact that each piece of armor had a different enchantment spoke volumes about the prowess of Yves' enchanters. Either there was an incredibly proficient master or there were a series of enchanters that knew some potent magic. True, Randolphus was the bastard of royalty so maybe he hadn't gotten the best Yves had to offer, but it was most likely still up there. It let Richter know that if he ever went up against the elite of Yves, or

even their wealthy noblemen, he'd be facing the medieval equivalent of Master Chief's armor.

Randolphus' weapons were also impressive. Each blade was augmented with a type of elemental damage, either water, fire, air or earth. It was clear to Richter that his new Companion's arms and armor were geared to fight within Yves' Dungeon, the Hall of Elemental Hunters. The chamberlain's undine heritage most likely made him susceptible to fire damage, so it made a great deal of sense that he wore a fire monster's hide to offset that. The fact that none of the enchantments gave water resistance probably meant that Randy's parentage covered that. That same reasoning explained the enchantments on the weapons. An earth damage dagger might make short work of an air elemental.

It was the chamberlain's whip that really stood out though.

Nether	Attack: +27
Whip of	Durability: 111/111
Weight	Item Class: Rare
Reduction	Quality: Masterwork
	Weight: 1.1 kg
	Traits: Made from the sinews of a Void Stalker, this whip is incredibly strong but also unbelievably light. The

magical properties also affect any unlucky enough to be ensnared

- 1) Ensnared targets are 50 kilos lighter in regards to being moved by the wielder
- 2) Soulbound (Level 2)

“How?” Richter asked simply. He was astonished by the power of his chamberlain’s armament. It was slightly insane to think that this powerhouse standing before him had been in charge of making sure the latrines were dug properly. The whip didn’t even seem to be enchanted, which meant it had been created by a high-level Crafter out of strong magical materials.

“My father wanted to ensure that I was well protected when I accompanied him into the Hall of Elemental Hunters. My weapons and armor were specifically crafted to destroy the monsters of that Dungeon. I promise you, they are deadly to almost any creature we will find here as well, my lord.”

Both Sion and Terrod were looking at Richter with questioning glances. Neither of his original Companions had the capability to identify magical items, so they were unaware of just how awesome Randolphus’ gear was. Even if they could identify the base enchantments, they still wouldn’t

have all the info. Richter had only been able to see the rank and level of enchanted gear since purchasing the second tier of his *Identify Enchantments* Talent.

“Trust me,” the chaos seed told his two friends, “he can handle himself.” Richter turned his head to look at Randy, “So you just happened to be wearing all that even before I announced we were going into the Dungeon?”

The Spy just arched one eyebrow while the corner of his mouth twitched up.

“Good enough,” Sion said shouldering his bow. He called Sapir down to him and Alma landed on Richter’s shoulders. “Shall we make our way over to the Dungeon?”

“Actually, I have a better idea,” Richter said with a smile. He had everyone stand close to him. Arcane words spilled from his lips and mist-colored light surrounded his hands. The eight-second cast time gave his Companions plenty of time to react.

Terrod spoke with a faint amount of alarm in his voice, “My lord? My lord, what are you doing?” A wind picked up that only seemed to be felt and to affect things within five feet of Richter.

Sion sighed and said, “There’s no point worrying about it.” A mist

appeared around all of them and they felt dampness on their skin. A slightly manic grin found its way onto the sprite's face, "Besides, depending on how you look at it, this is probably the easy part." Randolphus just gazed at his liege calmly.

Richter finished casting *Dungeon Transport*. Tendrils of mist rose from the ground and spun around them, increasing the density and opacity of the cloud. As the mist encircled his party faster and faster, they were obscured from view. A second later, the billowing grey air dissipated. To the amazement of the watching guards and villagers, Richter and his Companions were gone. A faint afterimage hung in the air for just a moment, a copy of the Great Seal on a miniature scale, till that faded as well.

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A bubble of mist light appeared in front of the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos a split second before the party appeared. The bubble burst, spilling forth grey mist across the ground. It disappeared, and the Companions were left standing in the same configuration they had been in at the village gate. They looked at each other for a moment, then took in their surroundings. In the space of an instant, they'd crossed from the village to the Dungeon mouth. The black spire topped with the golden sphere was close by.

Richter looked at all of them with a huge smile on his face, "Whew! Well, that's a relief!"

Silence reigned for a moment until Terrod asked, "A relief, my lord?"

"Well, yeah," Richter responded, "Where I come from, teleportation stories always have the risk of one person being left behind, or rapidly aging, or, of course, being turned inside out when you arrive."

"Inside out?" the captain echoed, turning slightly green.

“Oh yeah! All you see is a fleshy mess with blood and other random fluids shooting in every direction. Somehow, the mouth is always left intact though, so the man can scream.” Richter adopted a falsetto voice, “Dear god, kill me! Kill me! Whyyyyy? Why would you do this, god? This is worse than the torments of the deepest pits of hell!”

When it was quiet again Terrod stared at Richter with a mixture of horror and disbelief. Richter gave them a reassuring smile mixed with a relieved sigh, “So, good news. That didn’t happen... Result!” He raised his hand for a high five, but didn’t have any takers.

“Not to worry,” Randolphus told Terrod in a comforting voice, “I am familiar with the spell Lord Richter used. Disembowelment almost never occurs.” He turned his head towards Richter, and his left eye winked quickly. Terrod missed the exchange, but it filled the chaos seed with joy. He had a feeling he was going to like the fact that his chamberlain was showing more of his true personality.

Sion rolled his eyes, not gullible enough to fall for his best friend’s lame gambit. It didn’t mean he wasn’t also enjoying the creeped-out look on Terrod’s face, however. Richter started leading his Companions toward the Dungeon mouth. After only a few seconds, he realized Sion and Terrod were lagging behind.

“You know, this might be a bad idea, Richter,” the captain said in concern.

“I agree,” Sion seconded. His face wasn’t nearly as concerned as Terrod’s, but he was still clearly uneasy. Sapir’s voice squeaked agreement in pixiespeak.

“I am not sure that I can adequately protect you in the Dungeon,” Terrod continued. “I advise we leave immediately.”

Randolphus looked at the men in confusion and Richter’s own brow furrowed. Both Sion and Terrod were tough as nails and had killed dozens of enemies. And that was just the body count he knew about. Why would they be hesitating now, when they were ready to go minutes ago. They weren’t acting scared exactly, more like...

I’m a moron, Richter thought to himself. He accessed the Dungeon interface and started to give Terrod, Sion and Sapir immunity to the *Doubt* effect. Then another idea crossed his mind. Fighting to keep a smile off his face, Richter walked up to Terrod.

“Captain, your concern means the world to me,” he said loudly and firmly. “I want you to know how much I appreciate your council. I am confident, however, that with my Companions by my side we will be fine.” At the conclusion of his speech, he gave both Terrod and Sapir immunity to

the Dungeon's debuff.

Before Richter's eyes, Terrod's face firmed, "I am sure you're correct, my lord. I don't know why I was so hesitant. I am, of course, with you until death." Sapir's wings also flapped slower and the pixie seemed less agitated.

"I know that," Richter said clapping him on the shoulder. Then, with no further action, he said, "Well, let's go."

The chaos seed turned back to walk into the Dungeon, but Sion immediately raised his voice. There was a touch of desperation in it, "I still think we shouldn't go in there."

Richter turned to his best friend. There was glee in his chaotic heart, but only sympathetic understanding on his face, "Sion, there is no shame in being afraid."

"I'm not afraid!" the sprite said with irritation. "It's just-"

"And I know you have an issue with snakes," Richter continued, talking over his friend. "There is no shame in-"

"No one ever said I can't handle snakes!" Sion said with even more anger.

"Look," Richter said like he was talking to a little kid, "Sapir isn't scared. Tell him it's okay, Sapir."

“It’s okay,” Sapir told his meitu’meidon in a small voice.

“Shut up!” Sion snapped. The pixie child’s lips started quivering, and the sprite’s face immediately fell, “Oh! I’m sorry, Sapir!”

Richter started shaking his head, “Not cool, man. Not cool.” He reached his hand out, “Now look, if you want me to hold your hand-”

“Touch me with that and I’ll fucking stab you!” Sion screamed. His raised voice pushed Sapir over the edge and the month-old pixie started sobbing.

“Hey hey,” Richter said, his voice still *oozing* understanding, “there is no dishonor if you want to head back. You and Sapir can go help in the village. I think the washerwomen are understaffed. Don’t worry. You’re still my little guy.” A massive shit-eating grin was on his face at this point.

Sion’s face turned beet red. Anger overrode the *Doubt* effect and something shifted in his eyes. Richter had been keeping a close watch on the Dungeon log, so he immediately saw an important prompt.

Your Companion Sion has overcome the Doubt debuff of the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos.

Sion’s face widened as he received a similar notification. Anger turned to pure outrage as he spluttered, “You... you let me stay under that debuff?”

“Well, yes,” Richter said, an evil smile making its way onto his face, “but don’t you feel accomplished now? You did it!” His voice shifted into the oiliest supportive condescension, “All by your widdle self... Sionavar.”

Hearing his hated full name was too much for the sprite. A war cry belted from his throat, “Gaaaah!” and he threw a right cross directly into Richter’s jaw.

The chaos seed was still chuckling to himself as he fell back under the onslaught, but that didn’t keep him from throwing a knee into Sion’s ribs. It also didn’t stop him from immediately cursing as ridges on Sion’s chestplate jammed into his patella. Richter definitely had the height and weight advantage on his friend, but that differential was much smaller now that Sion had bonded with his pixie and gained a foot in stature. Sion charged him, and the two of them went down in a heap. The ensuing scuffle was punctuated only by Richter periodically saying, “Stop playing... Stop playin’!”

Randolphus looked down at his liege lord. Richter was a being of potentially infinite power and was also the man he had tied his fate to with a Blood Oath. The same man that was now rolling around on the ground, cursing and laughing almost simultaneously, while he fought with another man a foot and a half shorter than himself. The chamberlain looked to Terrod for help, but the captain just shook his head and said, “This is not the first time. They’ll stop soon.”

Alma floated above, casting healing spells on both of them. Sapir had stopped crying, and now hovered next to her, complete confusion on his young face. Randolphus looked at the yawning Dungeon mouth on his left, and then turned his gaze to the right to look at the fledgling village he had already invested so much in. Finally, his gaze settled back on the two friends still scuffling on the ground. They looked ridiculous, but he was starting to get that the obvious bond between them was as strong as mithril. A weary sigh escaped from his mouth, but then a rueful smile crested his lips. It was going to take a lot of work to shape his liege and the village into something truly worthwhile, but at least he wouldn't be bored!

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The two friends finally stopped fighting, and Richter gave them all access.

*You have given **Terrod**, **Sapir** and **Sion** access to the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos.*

*You have given **Sion** immunity to the Doubt effect of the Dungeon entrance.*

As the party walked into the Dungeon mouth, Sion gave him a final punch in the shoulder, “You’re still an asshole.”

“Guilty as charged,” Richter responded with a grin. “I would have given you immunity in a minute, but I also thought you had a fair shot at resisting the debuff. You’ve got that +50% resistance to the Enchantment spell school.” The sprite had been through a horrible ordeal as they had unlocked Richter’s second Power. Though Sion had almost died, he had gained a powerful resistance. Whereas all of Richter’s resistances were specific to certain types of magic, Fire, Water or Blood for instance, his best

friend had been granted resistance to a spell school. Now Sion had a +50% chance to fight off any spells that were of the Enchantment school, no matter what spell type. It meant his bestie was extremely good at resisting debuffs that affected the mind or controlled behavior, like *Charm* or *Befuddle*.

“Meh,” Sion said, barely mollified, “Definitely still an asshole.”

The party walked into the snake’s mouth and down the winding ramp that led to the Entrance Room, followed by the laden mist workers. Richter wasted no time in positioning himself in front of the Well of Offering, while Terrod and Sion looked around the Room. Randolphus stood next to his liege, carefully scanning the stones that made up the Well. The chaos seed began to unload the items from the mist workers.

Items Accepted! Dungeon Loot now includes: Iron Ingot, Steel Ingot, High Steel Ingot, Moonstone Ingot, Quicksilver Ingot, Cobalt Ingot, and Elementum Ingot.

Letting go of the more powerful ingots was a serious hit. Any metal stronger than high steel cost serious gold. A cobalt ingot could cost dozens of crowns, or the equivalent of thousands of dollars. Elementum ingots were priceless, as they could not even be found on this plane. It was an investment in his future, Richter reminded himself. Once he was done with the ingots, he began unloading the live plants from the mist workers.

Items Accepted! Dungeon Resources now include: Arrowroot, Forest Sage, Shiverleaf Frond, ...

It didn't escape Richter's notice that the live plants were termed "resources" while everything else he had placed in the Well had been called "loot." It wasn't a surprise seeing as how it lined up with what Randolphus had said, but it was still interesting. Once the live plants had been swallowed by the black hole at the bottom of the Well of Offering, Richter sent the mist workers to stand by the portal leading into the rest of the Dungeon. Then he reached into his Bag and began pulling out items.

Items Accepted! Dungeon Resources now include: Iron Ore, Copper Ore, and Moonstone Ore.

Richter started smiling. The thought of his village having access to a greater abundance of these resources was crazy exciting. He pulled out the next item, but stopped prior to giving it to the Well at Randolphus' touch.

"You must know before you offer the potion, that while this will make it possible to claim it as loot in the future, Dungeons can also put potions to other uses."

Randy continued explaining without pause. The chaos seed nodded in appreciation, not just for the information, but also because his chamberlain had finally learned to stop making hanging statements just so Richter would

have to ask an obvious question. If he hadn't, Richter had been fully prepared to call him a "thirsty question bitch." It was good that that could be avoided.

"An example is that offering a poison to the Well of Offering turns it into possible loot, but it also opens the possibility of traps tinged with that poison or monsters with a poisonous bite."

"Whoa," Richter said. "Okay, good safety tip. *Don't* give poison to the living Dungeon."

"Actually, my lord, I advise the opposite."

"The opposite?" Richter asked curiously. The chaos seed was immediately filled with irritation after the question passed his lips. Randy had made *him* the thirsty question bitch!

"Yes, my lord," the chamberlain answered.

Was that a faint smile on the man's face? If so, it was gone before Richter could be sure. He decided to keep a close eye on the Spy either way.

"I know that it may seem counterintuitive," Randolphus continued, "but there is one unquestionable truth regarding Dungeons. With great risk comes great reward. If you wish to have your Dungeon flourish, the stronger you make it, the better. Our earlier conversation about a Dungeon's Motivations was interrupted. I have told you that the primary goal of any

Dungeon is to join the Labyrinth. A large factor in that will be the number of Dungeon Points it generates each day. It will give us a rough timeline of how long we have until it reaches level two. How many points does it make, my lord? I hope at least fifteen.”

Richter accessed his Dungeon status screen again to retrieve the exact number, “One hundred fifty-three.”

“What?” Randolphus asked in shock. “How? Even with the bonus from being on a Place of Power that shouldn’t be possible for a level one Dungeon.”

Haha, Richter thought. Now who’s thirsty? “Yes, one hundred fifty-three.” He went through the breakdown of how the Item of Power and the Harbinger gave a base of fifty-one points a day, and how his two unlocked Powers increased that number by 200%.

“I know that I said it would be a good idea to make poison available to the Dungeon, my lord,” Randolphus began. His voice was deadly serious and Richter’s levity faded away. “I am telling you now that it is absolutely necessary. Your Dungeon is creating a massive amount of Dungeon Points. We may have barely a week before it reaches level two. Another law of the Labyrinth is ‘Power draws Power.’ The fact that your Item of Power is not only *artifact* but also utilizes a Higher Energy will attract powerful denizens

of the Labyrinth earlier than they would otherwise take notice. We must prepare the Dungeon for attack.”

The chamberlain’s demeanor was almost frightening in its intensity. Richter said the only thing he could, “Okay. Let’s do this.” He began dropping potions into the Well of Offering.

*Item Accepted! Dungeon Loot and Resources now include: **Health Potion** (brew)*

Richter stopped a moment, reviewing the prompt. He had offered his weakest health potion to the Well thinking there was no point wasting a stronger one. It looked like the Dungeon registered the difference though.

Potions had two major qualifiers: level and strength. A potion’s strength was determined by the alchemist creating it. More skilled alchemists made stronger potions. Strength determined the potency of the potion, traits like how much health was restored or how much damage poison could wreak.

A potion’s level on the other hand was based on Recipes. Finding new Recipes was like finding new Blueprints for buildings or Schematics for weapons. The knowledge was jealously guarded. One of the reasons the Dragon’s Cauldron was so valuable was that it made it much easier to find new recipes. It looked like the Well of Offering ignored potion strength, but

it did differentiate between potion levels. Richter sighed, there was no help for it. He added more valuable potions.

*Items Accepted! Dungeon Loot and Resources now include: **Health Potion** (tincture), **Health Potion** (solution), **Mana Potion** (tincture), **Mana Potion** (solution), **Stamina Potion** (brew), **Feline Grace** (solution) ...*

He moved on to the poisons he carried. Most came from a box he had taken off the Assassin Sonirae's body. They were only tinctures, but Tabia had been able to discover a recipe for a *solution* version of one of the poisons.

*Items Accepted! These items can be used as both Loot and Resources: **Poison of the Muddied Leech** (solution), **Poison of Stagnation** (tincture)...*

With each vial that he poured in, Richter hoped he wasn't making a mistake. He was literally inside of a monster giving it powerups that would make it easier for it to kill him. The whole risk being proportional to reward thing was something he could get behind though, especially seeing as how Hisako had told him the same thing. His experiences in The Land had made him suspicious, but it strained credulity to think that two venerable people like Hisako and Randolphus would give him the same bad advice. Richter also didn't want to risk his Dungeon being destroyed by other adventurers or monsters from the Labyrinth. Still, it didn't mean he liked the idea of

potentially signing his own death warrant by making the Dungeon monsters more dangerous.

Richter finished dropping the poisons in and had a final thought. He sent a mental communication to Alma, who immediately voiced her displeasure with his idea. It took some cajoling and a promise of the choicest piece of meat at the feast, but she finally agreed. The dragonling took an empty vial from him and placed it to her mouth. She worked her jaw back and forth for a minute, then told him it was ready. He took the potion back and examined it.

You have found: Minor Dragonling Psi Venom	Durability: 4/5 Item Class: Unusual Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: A venom excreted by a psi dragonling's teeth and claws. This causes minimal damage, but the penalty to Concentration is markedly increased. The target may also suffer from profound paranoia. While the poison is active, the target is also more susceptible to psychic attacks.
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Richter thanked his familiar while she grumbled at the indignity of

having to be milked. He dropped the vial down the Well of Offering. The prompt was not what he was looking for.

Item Refused! Psi Dragonling Venom is a Unique substance that can only be produced by an augmented Psi Dragonling.

While it felt good to know how special his girl was, Richter still decided against letting her know about the prompt. She had complained during the entire “milking,” and if he told her the venom was unique he could just see her working herself up even more. Besides, Alma was already insanely cocky, which was something he just didn’t understand. She was his soul familiar so she should be humble and reserved like him, right? Chalking the question up as an unanswerable mystery, Richer just moved on.

The next items he dropped in were weapons and armor.

*Items Accepted! Dungeon Loot now includes: **High Steel Sword** (Well Crafted), **High Steel Mace** (Exceptional), **Moonstone Dagger** (Superb), ...*

It was no surprise to Richter at this point that the quality of the weapons was taken into account. It meant he would need to convince his smiths, somehow, to make extremely high-quality weapons and armor so that he could then immediately throw their work down a well. Not looking forward to that conversation, Richter also offloaded the leather and high steel armor he had taken from the forge.

*Items Accepted! Dungeon Loot now includes: **High Steel Chainmail Shirt** (Exceptional), **Hardened Leather Helmet** (Well Crafted), ...*

Finally, he dropped in a dagger enchanted with *Life Damage*. The battle with the undead was looming on the horizon. If he could supplement the village armory with more weapons collected from the Dungeon, it would greatly help his people. Unfortunately, it just wasn't meant to be.

*Items Accepted! Dungeon Loot now includes: **High Steel Dagger** (Well Crafted)*

Enchantment rejected! As the Dungeon lacks the appropriate Room, enchantments cannot be absorbed through the Well of Offering.

He really had to figure out how to get more Rooms. It was a good thing he had someone knowledgeable about Dungeons right next to him.

“I keep getting prompts saying that I can't do things until I have certain Rooms. What does that mean?”

Randolphus nodded in understanding, “Dungeons can possess extensive tunnels, giant caverns, and even spaces that look like the inside of a castle or keep. They also grow areas with special abilities called Rooms. A Room can be triangular with only a few feet to each side or larger than a mountain. A Lair is basically a breeding ground for a specific type of monster. A Lair will generate monsters faster than the Dungeon could do

otherwise. The monsters also have a higher chance of evolving than if they were randomly spawned.”

“Why would I want that?” Richter asked incredulously. Again, Randy’s voice indicated that this was a good thing, but who the hell would want to evolve the monsters they fought against?

“Have a care, my lord,” the Spy cautioned in answer. “I am not telling you that making your Dungeon stronger is a safe thing to do. A Dungeon is not a pet, and it is not something that will bend to your whims. A Dungeon is loyal only to its own Motivations. You, though you are a Dungeon Master, are nothing more than food and power to it. A means of furthering its own ends. If you are strong enough, you can gain great power and wealth from your Dungeon. I am advising you to make it stronger because it is a valuable resource. ‘Power draws power’,” he repeated in his sing-song recitation voice. “The more powerful your Dungeon grows, the greater the rewards it will offer to you. This is not a place of safety, however. It is a place of danger and power. It would be best if you thought of the Dungeon as akin to a living fire. It may keep you warm, but all it wants is to burn.”

Abrams and Whedon, the man knew how to deliver a speech! Richter took the chamberlain’s warning to heart. He had been getting excited about the prospect of dungeon diving. Conquering a dungeon had always been his

favorite part of playing RPGs. This wasn't a game though. His friends and his villagers could die in here. Some of them most likely would. It could even mean his own death. His final death.

Richter hadn't really spent much time dwelling on it, but the prompts that appeared when he spent Chaos Points made it clear that his rebirth was not a guaranteed thing. There was an invisible but very real countdown to the day that he ran out of "lives." A fatalistic smile emerged on his face as he couldn't resist the inevitable thought. Game Over.

The Spy was looking at Richter in concern, not understanding the grim smile on his liege's face. To reassure the man, Richter told him, "I understand what you're saying." Randolphus held eye contact with him for a moment too long, but seemed satisfied that his liege and new protégé was taking him seriously.

"Not all Rooms are detrimental to adventurers, my lord," Randolphus said, continuing his explanation. "I have already told you of the site of my birth. A Shambhala is an example of a Room. A safe space in the midst of the Labyrinth or Dungeon. There are many other examples."

"How many types of Rooms are there?"

"How vast is the Universe?" Randolphus replied shrugging. "The Labyrinth is a reality unique to itself, and no one has seen the breadth of it."

Richter rolled his eyes a bit, but then asked, “How can I make more Rooms?”

“It will simply occur. The Dungeon will, one day, use some of its points to create a Room. The Room created will be consistent with its Motivations, but knowing that is next to useless if you do not know what those Motivations are.”

“There isn’t any other way?”

“Not unless you can find a Dungeon Keeper.” Randolphus paused for a moment, then added in an exasperated tone, “There is no need to glare at me, my lord, I was about to explain! A Dungeon Keeper is an individual that bonds to a Dungeon in the same way that you have bonded to your familiar. Perhaps the bond is even deeper. Before you ask however, I do not know how this is done. There has not been a Dungeon Keeper on the River Peninsula for hundreds of years, at least not in the Hall of Elemental Hunters or other Dungeons that I know of. I did hear stories, however, of a Dungeon Keeper born to the royal family about seven hundred years ago. It coincided with a Golden Age for the Kingdom of Yves. Some historians have attributed the kingdom’s prosperity to the amazing yields from the Dungeon at that time.”

“But what *is* a Dungeon Keeper?” Richter asked tersely. From the

prompts he'd been getting, finding someone that could fill that role would help him grow and control the Dungeon more than anything else.

"I was getting to that!" Randolphus responded with a bit of heat himself. A second later, he came back to himself and added, "My lord."

Richter smiled a bit. He was definitely liking this new Randy better.

"From what I have read, a Dungeon Keeper can direct a Dungeon to grow certain resources. He could even dictate what Rooms, monsters or loot were produced. I do not know if a Keeper can make a Dungeon go against its own Motivations, but he can mold it and shape it. As with all things in The Land, however, there is danger in having a Dungeon Keeper. While such a Professional could offer pathways to great power, the converse is also true. Remember, a Dungeon is a place of pure creation. The power of that cannot be overstated. A Dungeon Keeper could turn this place into a dangerous paradise... or a horrifying nightmare. The Golden Age of Yves ended when the royal Dungeon Keeper was slain by his own family."

"Why?" Richter asked in confusion. "Why would the royal family kill one of their own when he was so useful?"

"It is said the power of creation drove him mad. While this is never ideal, the madness of a Dungeon Keeper can become real inside of his Dungeon. The perversions that appeared in the Hall of Elemental Hunters

were so terrible that they were not documented, only hinted at in the official records. The royal family was forced to lure him from the Dungeon by killing his children one by one. In the end, his bloodline was the only thing he cared for more than the Dungeon. When he finally left the safety of his creation, they slaughtered him.”

“And his children?”

Randolphus just gave his liege a look to imply he should already have guessed their fate.

Richter shook his head. People were cold-blooded no matter what world you were in. “So as always in The Land, awesomeness and death go hand in hand.” Richter concluded.

“My lord?”

“Never mind, let’s finish this up.”

Richter dropped in a few more items. Various bits of jewelry made their way into the Well and were accepted. He even dropped in a weak Ring of Health as a test. It only added +5 health, so Richter wouldn’t really feel the loss if it didn’t work. It occurred to him that even a ring that he thought of as “meager” would cost most people in The Land several months of wages.

Items Accepted! Dungeon Loot now includes: Copper Ring with Garnet

(Well Crafted)

Enchantment rejected! As the Dungeon lacks the appropriate Room, enchantments cannot be absorbed through the Well of Offering.

Richter had expected the rejection prompt, but had wanted to know for sure. It would have been cool if the Dungeon had a loophole that let it accept enchanted items even though it had already rejected an enchanted weapon. Enchanted loot was apparently off the menu until more Rooms were built.

He threw in a few more sundry items from his Bag of Holding. Each was accepted without difficulty, until he offered the vial of Crypt Mistress Ichor.

*Item Accepted! This item can be used as both Loot and Resource: **Crypt Mistress Ichor.***

That was fine, but then a sound like the hiss of a massive serpent filled Richter's ears. One of his short blades was already halfway out of its sheath when a prompt appeared.

HISSSSS!

*Congratulations, Dungeon Master! You have uncovered a Motivation of your Dungeon: **Blood Rite.** Bring more blood to unlock additional perks. You have provided a new and powerful type of Blood essence to the Dungeon*

of Bloody Chaos. Your Dungeon hungers for more. Furthering this Motivation will strengthen the Dungeon; rare blood may add new abilities.

*Dungeon Ability Added! **Lust:** +10% likelihood for lairs to develop. +10% spawn rate for monsters.*

You have been Offered a Quest: **The Power of Blood I**

Blood Magic is imbued in the very stones of your Dungeon. It hungers for this vital substance. Given time, the Dungeon will devour barrels and then oceans of sanguine power. It is not only the amount which drives your Dungeon, however. It hungers for varied blood to drive its own evolution.

Success Conditions: Bring the blood of mighty creatures to your Dungeon and you will be rewarded! Will you supply the blood of five powerful creatures to your Dungeon to accelerate its evolution? Current Count: 1/5.

Reward: Unknown.

Penalty for failure or refusal of Quest: None.

Do you accept? Yes or No?

Before Richter could even read all the prompts, his chest began to itch. In a moment, the sensation turned into a horrible burning. “Arrggghh!” Richter cried out as he fell to one knee. The scent of cooking meat filled his nose and more than fifty points fell from his health. The searing agony

spread throughout his whole body and he collapsed to hands and knees.

Alma cried out in alarm and Randolphus reached a hand under his arm to keep him from falling over. Sion, Terrod and Sapir started to rush over. A golden glow surrounded the dragonling's body as Richter tried to tear his chestplate away from his body. The pain was so intense it was driving away his ability to think.

As suddenly as it came however, the agony disappeared. In its place was a cooling sensation, like diving into a refreshing lake on the hottest day of summer. A prompt filled his vision and the sound of the Mark filled his ears.

THOOMMM!

*Your Mark of the Adventurer has evolved! For being the first to discover and fulfill the **Blood Rite** Motivation of the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos you have earned a Boon: **Symbiosis**. If you continue to help your Dungeon evolve by providing the blood of new and powerful creatures, your own blood will gain new properties as well.*

*The **Symbiosis Boon** of your Mark of the Adventurer may now access the perk gained from the blood of the **Crypt Mistress**: Deadly Charisma. +2500 Relationship Points with any sentient dead, undead, or living dead. +10% Relationship Points with any sentient dead, undead, or living dead.*

Richter blinked from his position on the ground. Even though the pain was gone, his breathing was still ragged from his body's memory of it. He could think clearly enough now though to absorb the prompts from his vision and accepted the quest in the process. With no penalty attached he didn't really see a downside, and apparently feeding blood to the Dungeon would make him stronger as well. He was starting to get what Randy meant by saying the Dungeon was a pathway to power.

Terrod and Sion helped him up and he wiped away tears that had come unbidden to his eyes. While the chaos seed was explaining what had happened, it became clear that he didn't understand the significance of what had just occurred. Randolphus did, however, and it was making him reassess his liege yet again. Just who was this man? It had been more than eight decades since the Spy had received his own Mark of the Adventurer. In those eighty-six years, his own tattoo had evolved only twelve times. How did this... child... not only become a Dungeon Master but also gain a Boon before even battling in his Dungeon? Troubled thoughts of loyalty, murder and duty swirled in his mind, hidden behind the perfect mask of a Spy.

CHAPTER 24 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



“What the fuck was that?” Richter asked once he was back on his feet.

“You received a Boon and your Mark evolved,” Randolphus replied simply. He was still so distracted by his own musings that he forgot Richter hated incomplete explanations.

“I know that!” Richter snapped predictably. “I read the damn prompt! I meant, does that shit happen every time? It felt like my whole body was on fire!” Alma’s spell had restored his health and he didn’t have any permanent debuffs. Part of him wanted to look at his chest, but now that he was thinking clearly again, he knew that removing the armor from his torso would be a pain and a half. His attempt to pull it off when the pain began had been panic, pure and simple.

Randolphus just looked at him in reproach. His tone was instructional when he answered, “There is no power gained without pain, my lord. You

would do well to remember this.”

Richter rolled his eyes and thought, thanks dad. What he verbalized though was a repeat of his previous question, “Is that going to happen every time?”

“Most likely not. The first evolution is typically the most painful, though depending on what Boon you receive there may be more pain in the future.” His gaze turned speculative, “I did not mention it before because it is not something I expected to occur any time soon. Evolving your Mark is another reason that Adventurers brave Dungeons and the Labyrinth. It is possible to gain Boons that can make you much more powerful and offer unique capabilities.”

Richter remembered looking at his chamberlain’s Mark and seeing that it had variations that made it different from his own. Something clicked in his mind, “You’ve earned Boons, haven’t you?”

“I have, my lord.” Randolphus responded. He didn’t give more information though.

Frowning slightly, but attributing the terse reply to the Spy’s inherently secretive nature, he just accessed Randy’s status page again. Focusing on the Adventurer Mark, this time a subcategory did appear, but it offered no real information.

Boons: ???

While Richter checked his new Companion's status page, Randolphus studied him in turn. It was easy enough to guess what the chaos seed was doing. The Spy's face didn't show any negative reaction, but he wasn't pleased by either his liege's question or evaluation. One's Marks, abilities and skills were a private thing. After all, that knowledge could always be used against you. The Mark of the Adventurer in particular, was almost sacred, and wasn't discussed.

He had to remind himself that Richter was new to The Land and most likely didn't know that convention, but it still rankled. The fact that their status pages were now open to one another didn't soothe the chamberlain either. Even knowing that he had perused his liege's status page several times since becoming his Companion didn't make him feel better. All he could do now though was make an appeal.

"The capabilities of another are a private thing, my lord. If you require it, I will answer any questions you might have, but I ask that we do so in private. Please hold my status sacred, as I will do yours." Randolphus' tone was calm, but beseeching.

Richter looked at Sion and Terrod, who nodded in agreement with the chamberlain's words. He shrugged and resolved to talk with the chamberlain

about it later. Then he plastered a smile on his face, “Let’s go kill some shit!”

Richter handed out some health and stamina potions to each of them. Everyone except Terrod also received mana potions. Not being a caster, the captain had no need of them. They all got a Potion of Clarity as well, including Alma. He looked at Sapir, unsure for a moment as to how the nine-inch fairy would use a potion meant for someone four to eight feet tall. Sion explained it simply though, when asked.

“Any creature that is a *small*, *normal* or *large* size requires an entire potion. A *tiny* being only needs half a potion to receive the effect. Because Sapir is less than a foot in size, he’s *diminutive*, and actually only needs a fourth of the potion. He should be able to get four uses out of one vial.”

Richter frowned slightly, thinking of all the times Alma had swallowed an entire potion of the expensive fluid, “What’s the cutoff between *small* and *tiny*?”

“Anything less than two feet long and under eight pounds is *tiny*,” Randolphus supplied helpfully.

“Hmmm,” Richter said looking over to where his familiar was perched on the edge of the Well of Offering. Had she been guzzling more potions than needed?

Having followed the conversation, and now seeing her master studying her, she bared her teeth and hissed. To further clarify her unhappiness, she reared up on her back claws and flapped her wings at him.

You look beautiful, my love, Richter thought to her quickly. He didn't make a conscious decision to compliment her. It was more like he followed a well-ingrained reflex when confronted with an angry female. Everyone else apparently had the same survival instinct because they had all taken a step back from the irate dragonling. She might be small, but they all knew she was a deadly hunter who could use the Deep Magic, Thought.

Her response was to hiss even louder, then she started glowing yellow. Richter was fairly certain he was about to be electrocuted, so he went for broke. He reached into his bag and pulled out a blue-white gem. The effect was immediate. She stopped glowing and her neck snapped down to point at the psi crystal like a hound towards a downed duck. Her face started to shift into the draconian version of a smile, but then her eyes narrowed again. She looked back at her master and started baring her teeth anew.

Richter read the vibe and quickly pulled out a second psi crystal, holding them both towards her. This time he won her over completely. She jumped off the edge of the well and into his arms. He placed both crystals into her eager hands.

*You have brought your **Psi Crystal** in contact with a Mental creature. Would you like to expend the energy to enhance your soul familiar? Yes or No?*

Richter chose “Yes” and the rotating blue-white light inside of each gem stopped moving. The previously diffuse glow focused into a beam that lasered in on her face. Alma’s jaws opened wide and she inhaled sharply. The light from the crystals moved along the beam in one large pulse. The gems became inert, now lifeless rocks. He held her while she absorbed the psychic energy. Soon she was purring.

He shook his head and looked at her fondly. The plan had been to hold onto the gems in case she needed a sudden boost to her powers, but he had forgotten a core principle that applied in every world and plane of existence. If you referenced a woman’s weight, the options were to give her jewelry or feel the pain!

He kept the last psi crystal he’d gotten from the dreemar in reserve. Richter had no idea what they were going to encounter in the Dungeon. He did know that few creatures he’d encountered thus far had been able to withstand Alma’s *Psi Blast*. The fact that the little beast could harness the power of Thought had been a fatal surprise for many enemies.

Resistances were based on specific schools, like Water or Fire Magic. As psychic creatures were apparently rare in The Land, at least in the River

Peninsula, most never developed resistance to Thought attacks. More than a few higher level enemies had fallen to her because of this hole in their defense. Even mages of the Basic Elements were overcome by her psychic powers as their magical defenses failed to account for her use of Deeper Magic.

As she had just absorbed the mental energy of two creatures, Richter took a moment to address the prompts that had appeared and adjust her stats. Unlike his own points, he only had twenty-four hours to distribute these before they would disappear forever. He examined her status page first to remind himself of how she had progressed:

Name: Alma	Level: 38, 12%	Race: Psi Dragonling
STATS		
Health: 130	Mana: 820 <i>Regen/min: 49.2</i>	Stamina: 180 <i>Regen/min: 7.8</i>
ATTRIBUTES*		
Strength: 5	Agility: 33	Dexterity: 34
Constitution: 13	Endurance: 18	Intelligence: 82
Wisdom: 82	Charisma: 18	Luck: 18
SPELL POWER BONUSES		
Air 50%	Life 50%	
RESISTANCES		
Air 50%	Mental 100%	Life 50%
ABILITIES (Unused Points:3)		
Psi Bond – Lvl 6, points to next level: 5		

Psi Blast – Lvl 3, points to next level: 3

Brain Drain – Lvl 7, points to next level: 7

Psi Channeling – Lvl 2, points to next level: 2

His little girl was growing up! Richter was sure, well, mostly sure, that she wouldn't have really hurt him a second ago. Her stats made it obvious that she could really bring the pain though! The size of her mana alone was staggering. The level six Psi Bond they shared increased both her Intelligence and Wisdom by 60%. Her spell repertoire was limited to the Life and Air spells that he knew, but that was still almost thirty spells.

Not many were attack magics, but most of the Life spells still had a role in battle by providing support and healing. Her psychic abilities were also powerful. Her primary attack, *Psi Blast*, focused Thought magic into a cone. At level three, it could stun enemies, cause health damage, and disorient them so they would attack each other. Her special attack, *Brain Drain*, could immediately disable opponents up to level thirty-one. The dragonling was not a being to be taken lightly... despite the fact that she was currently purring in his arms.

Richter accessed the prompts that had appeared when she absorbed the psychic energy.

*Know This! Pure psychic energy can enhance the characteristics of your **Psi***

Dragonling. Each level of a **Psi Crystal** equates to 1 **Psi Point**. Current Psi Points available: **32**. Any unused Psi Points will be lost after 24 hours. At her current evolution, Alma has the following enhancements available.

Name of Enhancement	Traits	Cost
<i>Natural Armor II</i> Current Armor: 4	Increase the natural armor of your dragonling by +1	20
<i>Natural Attack I</i> Current Attack: 5	Increase the melee attack of your dragonling by +1	10
<i>Flight Speed II</i>	Increase Flight Speed by 10%	20
<i>Chameleon I</i>	Your dragonling's body will change color by 5% to match the surrounding environment	20
<i>Darkvision I</i>	Gives Darkvision with a radius of 50 yards	10
<i>Psi Poison</i>	Your dragonling's teeth and claws will now exude a stronger psi poison. The poison will now cause a slight amount of health, mana and stamina damage. Chance of spell misfire increased. Slight chance of spell backfire.	40
<i>Convert to</i>	Allows Purchase of one Characteristic Point	10

<i>Characteristic Points</i> (Size, Race, etc. adjustments still apply) Str 5, Agi 33, Dex 34, Con 13, End 18, Int 80, Wis 80, Chr 18, Luc 18	that will be added to base value	
<i>Convert to Ability Points</i>	Allows the Purchase of 1 Ability Point	40

There were many options, but all Richter really cared about was protecting his familiar. While increasing her flight speed was attractive, in an underground space like the Dungeon he wasn't sure how useful that would be. Richter made his choice.

*You have purchased: **Natural Armor II**. Alma's armor is now +5.*

*Total Psi Points Remaining: **12***

Blue light seeped through the dragonling's scales. It grew bright, but not blinding. Her old scales fell away and made faint *tink, tink* sounds as they struck the stone floor. Thicker scales grew in their place. As painful as the process looked, Alma remained relaxed in his arms. After seven seconds the light flared, leaving an afterimage in everyone's vision.

Richter had to blink a few times before he was able to see the changes in his familiar. Her snout had lengthened slightly again and she was noticeably heavier than before. The skin covering her wings was thicker and a faint line of hard bumps traced down her back. The ridges over her eyes had grown slightly and she appeared a bit more dangerous than before. She looked up at him and Richter fondly stroked her head. She trilled in pleasure. With a smile on his face, he looked at the remaining Psi Points and made another purchase.

*You have purchased: **Darkvision I**. Alma can now see 50 yards in the dark.*

This change in vision is automatic.

Total Psi Points Remaining: 2.

Her eyes looked the same to him, but that was probably because there was still light in the room. Still, he felt better about taking her into the Dungeon now. Richter looked around at his Companions, “Well, gentlemen; let’s go.”

They all walked towards the exit on the far side of the chamber, Sapir and Alma flying lazily above. The portal looked much the same as the last time Richter had seen it. A simple archway of stone, with a heart of blackness leading to the unknown. Just as before, Richter could make out a faint red energy field over the doorway that phased in and out of visibility.

“Any way to know what’s on the other side?” Richter asked his chamberlain.

“Not until we step through,” Randolphus replied with a shake of his head.

Richter nodded. Taking a deep breath, he spoke two words, “To infinity,” before stepping through and disappearing from sight.

An instant later, he was in the Dungeon proper. His eyes widened in surprise and amazement as he exhaled the rest of his breath, “... and beyond.”

CHAPTER 25 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



Richter walked into an immense cavern. It made sense now why the ramp leading down to the Entrance Chamber was almost a half-mile deep. Looking up, he couldn't see the roof. The entire ceiling was lost in shadow as it extended beyond the range of his vision. The ground was earthen and covered in thick grass that rose a foot off the ground. The size of the cavern was not what caught his attention. What drew his eye were the towers.

Columns of blood red crystal emerged from the ground and disappeared into the darkness above. Each pillar was five feet across and was spaced twenty feet from the next. Richter could not see how many there were, but there were enough that they blocked his view of the far side of the cave. Richter could easily see how these pillars could make a maze of sorts. The only light came from an unseen source hidden by the thick towers in front of him. A red glow suffused the air around him, but it was extremely dim.

Richter heard something behind him and turned around. He was standing only a few feet from a wall of bare, grey stone. Set within it was the doorway he'd come through. The energy field could be seen from this side as well. Though he had taken only a few steps forward, he couldn't see the Entrance Chamber. All he saw was the same blackness at the arch's center and the same red tint flickering at its boundary. His Companions quickly came through; they looked around with wide-eyed expressions similar to his own.

He looked at Randolphus, "You've been in a Dungeon before. Is this kind of thing," he motioned to the forest of opaque crystal pillars, "normal?"

"No," the chamberlain replied, slowly looking around. "This is something new."

"So what do we do?" Sion asked softly. The size of the cavern was so great, the sprite whispered by instinct, unwilling to break the feeling of stillness around them.

"We scout," Richter replied turning his attention to Alma.

Be careful, my love, he thought to his familiar.

Always, master, she thought back. The tone of excitement and bloodlust came through clearly in the mental message, belying her words. Alma could be as gentle as a kitten when playing with the pixies and the

village children, but there was no denying what she truly was... a predator.

As she flew off, Richter began to summon mist lights. He could only summon one a minute, but the glowing spheres lasted a year. He could also make them appear more than a hundred yards away. The lights slowly pushed back the gloom around them. Richter could have cast *Darkvision* of course, but that wouldn't help his Companions. If the Dungeon was as dangerous as he thought it was, they might need to see clearly in short order. The longevity of the lights should also help on future Dungeon dives.

The process would have been faster if Richter had brought Futen, but the remnant had almost no way to defend himself. The glowing orb had almost been destroyed by an undead knight the last time Richter had brought it along. Everything had worked out in the end and the knight even served one of his villagers now, but it was a wake-up call. The remnant was one of only three creatures that could control his village's settlement spells, the other two being Alma and himself. He wouldn't risk Futen in combat again unless he was in dire need.

While Richter created the mist lights, Sion stood nearby with an arrow nocked to his bowstring, Sapir floating above him. The pixie wanted to go explore the room as well, but a sharp word from the sprite in pixiespeak kept him close by instead. Terrod stood with his high steel sword out and his shield held at the ready. Richter absently realized that his captain needed an

upgrade to his gear and resolved to do something about that soon.

Randolphus stood nearby, eyes scanning the darkness. He looked relaxed, but it was the ease of a hunting cat, ready to pounce at a moment's notice.

Richter had no doubt the Spy could let his enchanted daggers fly in an instant.

Alma flew up to the roof of the chamber which was actually about eighty yards above where Richter and his Companions stood. Not an infinite expanse, but definitely high enough to allow large predators to hide unseen. The columns merged seamlessly into the ceiling, just as they did on the ground. The chamber was ringed by the dark red pillars, and from what Richter could gauge, it was about a quarter mile across. A few tunnels snaked out of the room at irregular intervals, appearing to lead deeper into the Dungeon. Each had a closed door, blocking further sight.

The dragonling summoned mist lights periodically and affixed them to the ceiling and the columns. Each time she flew around the chamber, she moved closer to the center in concentric circles, thoroughly mapping the room. By the time she had made her third lap, mist lights twinkled on the ceiling like solitary stars. On her fifth lap, she crossed out of the forest of blood red pillars. Her flight confirmed what Richter had seen: columns circled the entire chamber they were in except for one corridor to the right of his position.

There was a clear path leading from the center of the cavern to a fifty-foot-tall archway set into the side of the room. This doorway was all red stone, but where there should have been empty space in the middle, there was a solid wall of brown rock. It looked more like a picture of a door than a doorway itself. Richter couldn't see the reason for it. The archway couldn't keep his attention though compared to what was occupying the center of the chamber.

A large crystal floated thirty feet in the air. It was blood-red as well, but unlike the columns it was lit with a bright inner light. It hung suspended like a chandelier over a central clearing. The red luminescence Richter had seen after crossing through the portal came from this gem. Near the center of the chamber, the light was as bright as the noonday sun. The gem was ten feet tall and five feet wide. Richter recognized the shape immediately. It was a magnified version of the Bloodstone.

Richter flinched instinctually and searched his mind. He had bonded on a deep level with the powerful item. Each connection he had made, his Psi Bond with Alma, the link he had had with the shale adder, and the bond to the Bloodstone, occupied a particular portion of his psyche. To him, they appeared as lights of various intensities. Alma's blazed like the sun, the shale adder's had been like a torch, and the Bloodstone had been more like a doorway allowing Richter to be dominated. That connection had disappeared

when the stone became the Dungeon's Item of Power. He exhaled a sigh of relief at seeing it was still gone.

The floating gem might have been the same shape as the Bloodstone, but the size was completely different. The Bloodstone had been the size of a bowling ball, completely belying the massive power it contained. The crystal Alma was looking at was hundreds of times larger. For a moment, Richter was afraid that size might match power but, thankfully, all it seemed to be doing was emitting light. Once Richter was reasonably sure that he wouldn't be possessed again, he turned his attention to what was below the floating gem. Alma flew in slow circles over a herd of monsters.

There were almost forty of them. They looked like pigs milling around in the grass, but these were no simple porkers. Large tusks of jagged bone protruded up from their mouths. More sharp spikes of bone stuck out from their backs and sides. It was easy for Richter to see how a herd of these monsters running past could rend you to shreds. He pulled out his Traveler's Map so everyone else could see what Alma was sending him.

Sion immediately identified the creatures, "Koran tuskers." There was no hate in the sprite's voice, but there was a hint of grim realization.

Everyone looked at the sprite and he continued quietly, "They are territorial and aggressive. They can eat grass, but they will also run down

animals and beasts. They are usually easy to avoid because they make a horrible racket when they pass through the forest. Tuskers are fast though,” he cautioned, “and those bone spikes are not for show. They can pierce armor.” Sion looked again at the map that showed a live feed from Alma’s perspective and added, “These look a bit bigger than the ones I’ve seen before.”

Richter nodded and continued to look at the map while he formulated a plan. The monsters outnumbered them almost ten to one. A frontal attack would obviously be a mistake. If all the tuskers surged towards his group, they could be overwhelmed. The four Companions were well equipped and none of them were low level, but in The Land anything could happen. Even a level one creature could be deadly, and Richter had no idea what level these creatures were. The only way he could know that would be to use his Analyze skill, and he needed line of sight for that. Seeing through Alma’s eyes gave an incredible advantage in battle, but she couldn’t use his skills. His ability to take a Scout position from his War Leader skill could have given more information, but it didn’t work in the Dungeon. As Randy had said several times, “Dungeons are for adventure, not war.”

He ordered her to keep circling while he discussed tactics with his Companions. “I say we draw them to us,” Richter proposed. “Alma can cast some spells to make them scatter, then herd a few at a time towards us. If

we're prepared, it shouldn't be too hard to take them out."

No one else seemed to have a problem with the idea, so they got ready. Sion cast *Weak Haste* on himself and nocked a sprite arrow to his bow. Terrod readied his sword and hefted his shield. Randolphus just leaned against a pillar and honestly looked a bit bored. Richter began his own preparations.

First, he loaded his Ring of Spell Storage. It let him prepare any *novice* ranked spell of the Basic Elements for an immediate casting later. At this point, he had a large amount of options available to choose from, but he went with an oldie but a goodie. Words of Power fell from his lips and a green glow surrounded his hand. Rather than cast the spell, he focused on his ring and soon a prompt appeared.

*You have loaded your Ring of Spell Holding with **Weak Sonic Wail**. This spell will be accessible for instant cast for the next 24 hours.*

It wasn't his strongest spell, but if a mass of the tuskers rushed him, the auditory attack should disorient them. With any luck, they might even run into one another and cause some damage.

Next, he summoned his strongest creature. Moving both hands this time, he dual cast *Summon Minor Chokespore Arachnid*. More words of Power issued into the air. The level ten spell was noticeably more difficult to

cast, but it was still well within his capabilities. His high affinity and mental training with Alma gave him a spell control that belied his meager skill level of eleven in Earth Magic.

The spell wasn't cheap. The base cost of one hundred and seventeen mana was magnified almost three and a half times since he chose to dual cast the spell. The loss of over four hundred MPs all at once gave him a splitting headache. He powered through the final syllables of the four-second cast nonetheless and was rewarded by a green disc appearing in the air. The pain in his head faded to a dull ache.

The summoning was meant to call forth a level twelve spider. Between his dual technique and his Summoner's Ring, a *rare* item, a level twenty-one arachnid came through the portal instead. For the next quarter hour, the creature would be bound to his will.

Richter made eye contact with it, establishing a weak psychic connection. Then he took a deep breath, preparing to cast a spell for the first time. He'd been both anxious and excited to use his Higher Energy spell. Richter had learned the lesson that magic was not a toy and could have serious consequences. He couldn't know what would happen until he nugged up and did it though. So without further delay, he used the magic that was his race's namesake for the very first time.

Akaton Evolution required both hands to cast. Grey light surrounded his hands as arcane words fell from his lips. His pupils widened and his heart began to thud rapidly as the Power gathered inside of him. His teeth bared and he became aware of every hair follicle on his body. The magic continued to build.

Richter hadn't known what to expect. Using Basic Element magic barely had a noticeable effect on him. Deeper Magics had more insidious consequences, temporarily unbalancing his personality in sometimes dangerous ways. Blood Magic could make him a slave to his emotions. Spirit Magic could fill him with a giddy high. It made him feel as invincible as a fool on PCP and left him with the same hunger to use it again. This time he needn't have worried. As the Chaotic magic began to fill him he knew a peace that he'd seldom known before. This was his *birthright*!

Roiling tendrils of grey energy built on his hands. They danced and flowed across his skin until the power concentrated on the tips of both index fingers. Twin beams of Chaos magic left his hands, condensing into one ray of Higher Energy before striking his summoned spider. It outlined the arachnid in grey energy before disappearing completely.

"Wha-" Sion began, but he cut his question off because a moment later, the spider began to change.

The tips of its legs grew sharper and its body narrowed, looking sleeker. Fangs grew longer and adopted a poisonous green color. Its eyes grew so large they merged into one long band across its face. Even more interesting, the thousands of facets that comprised its cycloptic eye grew bright and shining, like countless emeralds, sapphires, rubies and diamonds fused together.

*Know This! Your spell Akaton Evolution has evolved your **Chokespore Arachnid** into a **Mesmer Spider**, 1 of 4 possible evolutions. Attack +2. Speed +5. Special Ability: Entrance*

The Companions stared at it in surprise, including Richter. He hadn't known what to expect, but he wasn't disappointed. This thing was looking crazy cool! He quickly explained his new spell to the other men. They each looked a bit uncomfortable hearing he had so casually bandied about a Higher Energy spell. They were used to his strange ability to do the unexpected and impossible though, so they accepted his words without further comment.

Richter sent the spider up one of the columns with a mental command. Its sharp legs found easy purchase on the red crystal as it got into position. If a clustered pack of the tuskers rushed them, the arachnid could launch a surprise attack from above. The spider could bite, but its main attack came from the holes on its back. Each could release fungal spores

which, when inhaled, incapacitated targets for a time. Then it could use the sedating venom in its bite to render its victim's unconscious.

Between the summoning, the evolution, loading his spell ring and casting mist lights, Richter had little mana remaining. He could have drunk a mana potion, but he had precious few left. It would come down to physical combat, he decided, needing to grow those skills anyway.

With all of that done, Richter filled Alma in on the plan. She readily agreed, seeing as how it meant she could start attacking immediately. She flew higher and in tight circles around the glowing red crystal, still unseen by the monsters below. Then she sighted on one of the larger ones near the middle of the herd and cast *Weak Lightning Bolt*.

Her body glowed golden a moment before the spell finished, and then a bolt of yellow lightning streaked away from her draconic snout. It crossed several dozen yards in a blink and the Air magic struck one of the larger boars just behind the shoulders. It let loose an oink of reflexive pain that turned into a squeal of rage. She had been hoping that the *Stun* effect of the lightning spell would kick in, but even with her 50% bonus to Air spell strength, the spell was still *weak* ranked. Some of the smaller sows ran away from the main pack, but most of the tusked fixed their eyes on Alma and grunted in anger.

As mad as they were, there was no way for them to retaliate against the dragonling. Alma didn't help their mood by trumpeting her superiority while she coasted above them. She made sure to pass only a few feet above their heads to add insult to injury. There was still no real danger to the cocky familiar. The tuskers may have been extremely dangerous to land-bound creatures, but they sure as hell made terrible jumpers. The monsters reared their heads in a vain attempt to gore the dragonling, but she just laughingly trumpeted again, glorying in her own magnificence once more. She attacked again.

Her body glowed yellow a second time, and a circle of shining dust appeared just below her. Some of the roars of anger turned to porcine cries of pain and panic. *Glitterdust* did very little actual damage at first, but the thousands of shining particles had sharp edges. They found their way into the eyes of several of the vicious pigs, who were blinded for a short time. A bare moment later, she cast again.

Alma cast *Weak Life Bolt* and a beam of golden energy struck another tusker. The spell only caused eight points of damage, a drop in the bucket considering the +10% HP bonus that creatures of the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos enjoyed. Still, it added to the growing pandemonium and caused more of the creatures to scatter.

She flew straight up and in an instant her speed-enhanced body was

lost to the poor eyesight of the koran tuskers. They didn't have to wait long to see her again. She flipped end-over-end, and with a flap of her wings dove down towards the monsters. A cone of pure psychic energy shot forward from her small frame. While one of the tuskers had been able to shake off the *Stun* effect of her Air magic, they had no defense to the Deeper Magic, Thought.

A dozen dropped at once in response to her *Psi Blast*, like marionettes with their strings cut. All the monsters caught in the twenty-foot radius of her primary attack began bleeding from the eyes, nose and mouth. Finally, the third effect of her ability completed the task her master had set her. Four of the tuskers were afflicted with *Disorient*. Two ran amok and the sharp spikes on their sides made bloody furrows in the others. Another two immediately started attacking the rest. The madness was complete. Alma gave a high-pitched roar of triumph and chanced raking her claws across the back of one of the fleeing sows. Several long gouges appeared in its flesh and its pain-filled squeals joined the wondrous racket the rest of the monsters were making. The dragonling's bloodthirsty cry echoed through the cavern.

Richter and his Companions had been watching the entire attack on his Traveler's Map. It wasn't exactly cable, but the show was definitely Netflix-worthy. An involuntary smile crept onto his face as he saw Alma absolutely own twenty monsters and make twenty more flee in terror. He

even chuckled a bit when she bloodied her claws on the back of the fleeing tusker.

A part of him paused to reflect on that while they watched the show. It wondered when blood and battle had become something that he not only accepted but craved. Had he been corrupted by The Land or was he just discovering what he always had been - a predator like his soul familiar? Then a tusker caught sight of his Companions, and the time for introspection had passed. The time of blood and battle had come.

The creature squealed and began racing towards them. Richter took the time to use Analyze.

Name: Koran Tusker **Disposition:** Angry

Koran Tuskers are pack hunters. The hardened bone that juts out from their bodies has sharp edges and points. The creatures have poor eyesight but excellent hearing and senses of smell. Territorial and aggressive, they attack other creatures if they come across their path but will run from larger monsters.

Level: 12

Health: 309 **Mana:** 22 **Stamina:** 365

Strength: 14

Agility: 21

Dexterity: 22

Constitution: 28

Endurance: 36

Intelligence: 2

Wisdom: 2

Charisma: 4

Luck: 11

Richter spared a glance for his Companions. Terrod hefted his shield and braced himself to meet the animal's charge. Sion began imbuing his arrow and Randolphus... well, Randolphus just continued to lean against one of the pillars looking bored. As the tusker ran closer and was joined by two others, the chaos seed reflexively tried to make a war party. He cursed his own stupidity when a red prompt appeared.

Dungeons are for Adventure, not War! All bonuses from War Leader Badges and Promotions are suspended while in a Dungeon or Labyrinth.

Richter was still swearing when the battle began. Sion fired his imbued arrow to claim first blood. It streaked across two dozen yards in an instant, blue energy and yellow lightning playing around the shot. When it struck, there was a small *boom* and it detonated against a monster's snout. Blood, meat and teeth exploded out from the shot, but the creature was not yet undone. It screamed in pain, but also in mindless fury. The tusker continued to race towards them, but now its face was a macabre horror, missing both nose and lips but still possessing one foot-long tusk and half of its sharp teeth.

The chaos seed fired his own arrow. He didn't invest any mana as his reserves were still low. Even without magic, his moonstone arrow packed a

serious punch. Using the new technique Randolphus had taught him, his combat log instantly told him how much damage he'd done.

BEGIN COMBAT LOG

***Richter strikes Koran Tusker for 270 damage:** [(+18 Recurve Bow of the Wood Sprite + 8 Moonstone Arrow) + 34% for level 17 Archery + 76% for 38 points of Dexterity) – 1 Armor] x 4 Critical Hit for Collapsed Lung.*

***Koran Tusker has a Collapsed Lung.** -50% exercise tolerance. -15 HP per second.*

END COMBAT LOG

The yellow-white arrowhead sank deep within the body of the charging monster. It stumbled forward another step before collapsing with a wheeze, the fall driving the arrow in even further. Its belly swelled once more with breath before it exhaled for the last time and died.

Richter was thrilled to now be able to use his combat log without it being distracting. The info was a bit technical, but it was awesome all the same. A thought was all that was required to adjust his settings to provide less information in the future. It was done before he even nocked another

arrow. As he sighted on another monster, there was a broad smile on his face. He loved this shit!

His moonstone arrows probably cost several silver each, a fortnight's pay for most workers, but there was no denying the damage they inflicted. The fact that his last arrow had penetrated the tough muscle of the tusker so deeply was the only reason he had obtained a critical strike. More monsters began charging them and Richter fired again.

The sounds of battle attracted more and more of the tuskers. All around the cavern the beasts began to run towards the Companions. If Alma hadn't scattered them first, the party might have been overwhelmed. Even with the tuskers coming one at a time, the herd began to press them.

A monster raced around the side of one of the columns and tried to ram Terrod. The captain swung his shield down and to the left, deflecting the charge. The tusker's momentum carried it forward as the captain jabbed down with his sword. The tip scored deep into the creature's back, but nothing vital was struck. It turned quickly and tried to gore him again, but Terrod had already reset his position, shield held in front of him.

Sion helped him by shooting it in one leg. The imbued arrow didn't have much charge, but it was more than enough at short range to pop the sinews of its flesh like cooked spaghetti. It went down with a crash and

Terrod stabbed deep into its side. He half withdrew his sword, but when it started to buck he shoved his weapon into it again. This time, the blade pierced its heart and the monster lay still.

Sapir transformed once the battle began. He changed from a sweet eight-inch-tall figure with the countenance of a ten-year-old to a dangerous fey creature. The celestial pixies were each born with the ability to shift into a Battle Form. His features grew much sharper and the light yellow of his hair deepened to an intense bronze. His wings turned metallic and the edges grew razor sharp. Even his tiny teeth and nails grew sharp and jagged. He flew around Sion snarling at the tuskers.

Four of the tuskers rushed Sion at once. He fired the imbued arrow he had charged on his bowstring for one second. The arrow struck a beast in its side. Skin was sheared away leaving a bloody mess, but with minimal mana invested not much damage was done. The blow still knocked it off balance though and it face-planted, flipping end over end. When it stopped moving, it squealed in pain while blood continued to leak from its body. The sprite fired another arrow. This time he didn't imbue it. Instead, he used his subskill *Stun Shot*. His stamina immediately dropped thirty points, but the arrow stopped the tusker cold. Its limbs went limp even as its momentum carried it forward several more feet.

Sapir shouted unintelligibly in his high-pitched voice. With his

metallic wings fluttering faster than the eye could follow, he extended both arms with his fists clenched together. A beam of yellow Air magic shot forward, striking another tusker in the snout. The monster squealed in anger. It wasn't harmed much, but the pixie's attack afflicted it with *Stun*. The tusker dropped, leaving it wide open to attack.

Sion dove to the side to avoid the other tuskers' charge. His body tucked into a ball like an acrobat with his bow held lengthwise across his body. He rolled twice before popping back to his feet. Within a second, he had nocked another arrow and activated another subskill, *Double Shot*. In the space of another second, two arrows were flying at point blank range. While the subskill drained even more stamina and caused a drop in his accuracy, the enemy was less than two yards away. The first arrow struck the top of the creature's back and did minimal damage. The hide and bone were thickest at that point. The second arrow, by an ounce of luck and a pound of skill, sunk into the monster's throat. It went down, hacking up blood by the cup.

That left only two monsters on their feet. They attacked, unafraid despite the deaths of the others. Sapir had been drained by using his Force Blast, but he tried again. This time, the yellow light only flickered around his fists before winking out. The pixie screamed in frustration but, with the careless invincibility of youth, just threw himself at a tusker. The boar-like creature had been stamping, about to rush Sion, but now it tossed its head

wildly. Sapir was scratching at its face and eyes, and the pixie's keen-edged wings were doing even more damage as the tusker struggled. Sion hated to see his *meitu'meidon* in danger, but was a hardened warrior. He kept his eye on the prize. The sprite dropped his bow in favor of drawing the elementum short sword gifted to him by Richter. He faced the remaining tusker, circling as he waited for his perfect moment.

The tusker charged. Quick like a darting viper, Sion stepped to the side and swung his fey blade. It sliced through tusker's back leg like a cleaver through water. A shard of jutting bone was shattered in the same strike. Blood fountained from the wound, staining the ground. The monster gave a too-human scream as it collapsed, the other three legs scrambling to keep it upright.

Sion didn't pause. He stepped past the downed monster and stabbed his blade into the tusker his *meitu'meidon* was fighting. Sapir was forgotten by the beast as this worse agony consumed its consciousness. It tried to turn, but Sion kept his blade in its side. Its movement sawed the elementum weapon into its own organs and it stopped in pained shock. The sprite quickly removed the blade, slashing right then left in quick succession. His powerful weapon cut deep into the back of the beast's front leg and the front of the creature's back leg. It crashed to the ground just like its fellow. In the next ten seconds Sion delivered the coup de grace to the two tuskers he'd

disabled and the one he had stunned. Blood fountained into the air and he was left standing in a circle of his dead.

More of the monsters arrived.

A pair of tuskers came from the right, charging directly at Randolphus. Richter sighted on one of the monsters, concerned for the Spy, but then Randy disappeared. Even with him watching, the chamberlain could use *Stealth* with ease. The creatures stalled their charge for a moment, confused by his disappearance, but then they ignored their confusion and started running at the chaos seed. He loosed his bow at one, but the arrow was deflected off a ridge of bone, doing little damage. Richter dropped his bow and drew both short swords to meet their charge.

Both monsters died before they had crossed half the distance to him.

Randolphus had phased back into sight in midair. He had jumped perpendicular to the first beast's charge and plunged a heavy dagger down just above its shoulder blades. His strike was as powerful and precise as a matador's. It severed the creature's spine and the tusker fell to the ground, limp as a jellyfish but still alive. It mewled on the ground, head thrashing slightly, but no motor signals could reach its body.

The other creature had time to register the attack on its fellow, but couldn't arrest its own forward momentum. Within seconds of his first

strike, Randolphus threw two small daggers. The first hit the tusker in the haunch. Faint lines of electricity radiated out from the wound, but nothing else happened. The second dagger had a much more impressive effect. The six-inch blade sank into the muscle of its back with a *sizzle*. A split second later, the *Burn* enchantment triggered. The entire body of the tusker was immolated. Its squealing turned into a high-pitched keening as it lost all reason. It ran off in a random direction, trailing fire into the darkness. Randolphus took off in pursuit, another dagger already in hand. Before he had taken two steps, his body disappeared into *Stealth* again.

Richter started to grab his dropped bow, but three tuskers came around one of the columns all at once and barreled down at him.

Little help! he thought to his familiar. Then he jumped as high he could. His short swords were powerful, but they weren't much use against a collective ton of charging monster. The tuskers were running close together so he cleared most of them, but a spur of jagged bone scraped his calf. A muted curse escaped his bared teeth as he started bleeding.

*You have suffered **11** damage!*

*You are **Bleeding**. You are losing **1** health every **1** second.*

The tuskers turned to attack again but were struck from above. The mesmer spider arachnid descended from where it had perched unseen. It

dropped onto the back of one of the tuskers, its eight legs piercing the tusker's sides like a sadistic vise. The spider bit into its victim's neck and an acidic poison began to spread. The tusker spasmed in pain, several organs pierced, as the spider rode it to the ground. Its fellow turned to enact revenge, but the arachnid triggered its special attack. A cone of prismatic light shot from its one long eye and entranced the tuskers.

The light continued as the spider skittered closer. It bit each tusker once, injecting more venom. The two monsters collapsed, green foam proof of the poison in their bloodstreams. The spider then, almost delicately, walked over their bodies, puncturing them again and again with its sharp legs. Now with its prey severely wounded but still alive, the arachnid lowered its head to the puncture wounds and drank in the dissolved slurry of blood, muscle and viscera that its poison had left behind.

Richter sent the spider a mental command to abandon its meal and attack the two tuskers that Terrod was fending off. Blood still dripped down his leg, losing him a point of health every second. It was nothing compared to the over six hundred points of life he had at this point though. Richter removed an herb from his bag and placed it in his mouth. It was slightly bitter, but forest sage had healing powers that slowly replenished his health. It could only replenish ten points over five minutes at baseline, but his forty skill levels in Herb Lore increased the HPs replenished by +120%. He knew

his wound would be healed in less than three minutes.

With his elementum blade in one hand, he cast *Soul Trap*. A hard downward stab was all it took to kill the helpless creature. A rainbow of swirling light rose into the air. It spun around Richter's body twice before disappearing into his bag. One of the empty *common* soul stones contained within began to glow, now filled with a *basic* soul. He repeated the process twice more, and two more souls were captured.

A curse caught his attention. Terrod had been knocked over and had his shield over his body like a blanket. It was all that was keeping a tusker from eviscerating him. Even so, one of the bony tusks had pierced the wooden shield and had entered the arm behind it. Every flailing move the monster made to get at Terrod tore the hole in the captain's arm wider. It was to his credit that the man wasn't screaming in sheer agony. Another beast was already running towards the captain, and there was no way Terrod was going to be able to keep it from savaging his face.

Richter roared and threw his short sword. Even as it flew he started running towards the captain. Randy was still nowhere to be found. Sion was engaged in his own battle, dodging and rolling even as he shot tuskers at point-blank range. The arachnid was a bit further away and had triggered its special attack again, downing three more, but it was bleeding ichor from two large holes in its abdomen. Two of its legs on one side were limp. Alma was

clawing at another tusker's eyes. If Terrod was to live, it was up to him.

The green-bladed weapon flipped end over end. In a perfect world, it would have sunk deep into the tusker's body. That's not what happened. This was real life. The edge of the short sword hit both the edge of the shield and the side of the monster at once. The damn weapon was almost vertical when it struck. He had to learn how to throw blades!

Off-target or not, the fey metal was impossibly sharp and bit deeply enough into the tusker to draw blood. Unfortunately, it also bit into Terrod's shield enough to almost cut the man.

"Hey!" Terrod shouted. He turned his head and looked at Richter incredulously even as he continued to struggle and bleed.

"I know! I know!" Richter half-apologized. He closed the final distance to the captain. The momentum short sword had fallen to the ground. Unfortunately, the damage it had done to the tusker hadn't distracted it. The creature had just been driven further into a rage and renewed its efforts to kill Terrod. To make matters worse, the second tusker was now only five yards away.

Richter drew his moonstone short sword and, without breaking stride, rammed the blade into the tusker's head. Hardened bone or not, the skull shattered inward. The full two feet of yellow-white metal sank into the

monster and killed it instantly. He wasn't done though. His momentum continued to hurdle him over Terrod. One fist pointed at the charging tusker and he triggered his Ring of Spell Holding. Invisible waves of sonic force shot out at his target, which was only two yards away. The tusker squealed in pain and faltered but didn't stop, focused on hurting the creature that had hurt it. Richter hadn't expected it to stop though, he had just needed to buy a second of hesitation. Now properly braced, he held both empty hands out to meet his opponent. Reaching low, he caught both forward tusks and went into pure beast mode!

“Maximum effort!” he groaned as the tusker's nearly unstoppable force met his unbreakable will. Both gauntlets wrapped around the large tusks and he twisted and lifted. Every ounce of his thirty-three points of Strength, more than three thousand newtons, went into his effort. Though he had not really used brute strength to win his battles in a great while, at level thirty-five he was more than just human.

The tusker's body rose off the ground and it gave a surprised grunt. Using his own body as a fulcrum, he swung the creature's body to the side and slammed it against one of the blood-red columns. A bony spine broke off its body, but the stone of the column remained completely whole. All fight went out of the beast and Richter swung the body again like a sack of potatoes, slamming it into the ground. With both short swords gone, he let go

of one tusk and pulled his high steel dagger out. Keeping its head facing up with his other hand, he stabbed his blade into the tusker's eye. The point caught on its eye socket for a moment, but with a savage grunt, he leaned on the weapon. There was a sickening crunch that he felt first in his hand then up his arm as the eye socket fragmented. For the second time in a minute, he destroyed the brain of a monster.

“Watch out, my lord!” came a shout from his right.

Richter caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye but had time for nothing else. Then there was pain.

You have suffered 29 damage!

A tusker had run up behind him and pierced his calf with its tusk. It kept rushing forward, knocking him off his feet. Richter screamed as his legs went out from under him and his body flew up in the air. He fell hard. The dagger was still inside of the last tusker's brain and he had no other weapons on hand. Suddenly, Randy's bajillion knives didn't seem like overkill. There were more weapons in his Bag of Holding, but extricating items from it took focus and at least a few seconds. Both were a luxury he just didn't have.

Terrod was still getting to his feet and Sion was holding two tuskers at bay with his short sword. Randolphus was running towards him but was too far away. The monster Richter was fighting turned immediately and sank its

teeth into the same leg it had already gored. His sprite armor was resilient, especially for light armor, but the beast's sharp teeth could still pierce it in places. The armor also did nothing to stop the crush damage the monster's bite inflicted.

You have suffered 43 damage!

Tears in his eyes, Richter began trying to summon the clarity of thought needed to cast a spell when the tusker suddenly dropped. Blood leaked from its eyes, mouth and nose, and it spasmed. Atop the creature's shoulders was Alma's dark form. The dragonling drained Thought energy from the tusker and siphoned off its health, mana and stamina at the same time. Terrod walked up, his injured arm cradled to his chest. Knowing that Alma was helpless while she fed, he carefully drove his sword into the beast's neck. Between his attack and Alma's Brain Drain, the monster succumbed seconds later.

A loud *boom* punctuated another of Sion's imbued shots against the creatures. His latest target stumbled away, a large chunk missing from its side. The close-range detonation had made a tennis ball-sized hole in it. Splinters of ribs, mangled flesh, and strips of skin with charred hair hung around the hole; blood flowed freely from the wound. One large artery must have been severed because a gout of blood shot forward from the back of the crater. The spurts were angled inward somewhat because the jets of blood hit

the edge of the pit Sion's arrow had made. Every beat of the tusker's weakening heart added to the splattered mess. It still stumbled towards Sion, unaware that its death was already assured.

Before it could take another step, Randolphus phased into existence behind it and plunged his large dagger into the wound. He scored a critical hit. Multiplied by his sneak attack and its already weakened state, the tusker gave up the ghost.

There were no monsters left, and the only sound Richter could hear was his own breath exiting his open mouth.

Richer cast *Minor Slow Heal*. That almost bottomed out his mana, but it was worth the small headache. The two hits he'd suffered had taken more than a hundred health and he'd picked up a *Bleeding* status. There was no true danger to his life, but it didn't stop him from feeling a shit-ton of pain. The Life spell helped ease that almost immediately.

Alma had detached from her victim and her body was now enveloped in a golden glow. From the slight angle that now existed in the middle of Terrod's right forearm, it was clear that either the ulna or radius, or most likely both, had been broken. Luckily, no bones were sticking out past the skin so it looked like a simple fracture. Alma made eye contact with the captain, established a mental connection and sent one word across it,

Straighten. One-word communication was all she could manage with those she didn't share a Psi Bond with.

Gritting his teeth, Terrod grabbed his right hand with his left. The man showed what a badass he was by pulling to realign his own bones. A muffled scream escaped his clenched lips and his eyes watered, but he remained upright. Alma cast *Weak Mend Bone* and followed it immediately after with *Minor Slow Heal*. The pain in Terrod's face began to ease as soon as the bones straightened and the repair began. It was almost a relief as he applied a faint upward pressure on his right hand, further helping the bones align. It took a few seconds, but when it was done he smiled affectionately at the dragonling.

"Thank you, Alma," he expressed sincerely. He carefully rolled his wrist and found it to be hale. Then he hefted his damaged shield and sword, peering into the surrounding gloom just in case they had missed enemies. Alma purred in contentment.

"Don't praise her!" Richter shouted, having gotten back onto his feet. He tested his newly healed leg and found it a touch stiff but completely useable. The "tight" feeling wasn't unexpected after a fresh healing. "Where the hell were you?" he demanded of the dragonling hovering in mid-air.

I was killing the tuskers I disabled, she responded archly. **I did*

*not think that my powerful master would have such a problem with a few little piggies!** She sent him a mental replay. After the others had scurried off, she had hopped from one downed tusker to the next. The dragonling knew her stun blast would only last seconds so she had capitalized on the creatures' helplessness. With her sharp claws, she had opened a small but deep incision in each of their necks.

The first one she had had to attack three times before she found the carotid. She had started too far to the side, not knowing the carotid was more central on their fat necks. After that though she was able to fatally wound two more before the creatures began to stir. Alma still managed to hop to a fourth tusker and blind it as it was struggling to regain its footing. Her first few victims didn't even make it back to their feet, too weak as they bled out.

The fourth ran off in a random direction, squealing in pain and fear. It ran for a minute before barreling head-on into a column. When it fell to the ground, dazed, she opened its neck with her claws. Then she flew back to help Richter and his Companions. Her master looked more closely at her and saw that her dusky scales were actually drenched in the tuskers' dark red blood. In the weak light, he hadn't initially been able to tell.

"Well..." Richter started, still pissed because of the pain that was still fading, "don't go off playing on your own next time." He knew that she had done great, but he wasn't going to let logic interrupt his bad mood.

Somehow Alma managed to make her mental voice shrill with static as she expressed her opinion of his displeasure. He rolled his eyes and did his best to ignore her as Sion and Randolphus walked up.

“Any problems?” Richter asked.

Sion smiled ruefully, “I was knocked around a bit, but I’m fine. Your spider has seen better days though.” He threw a thumb out, pointing behind his back.

Richter leaned to the side and saw that the spider had been crushed under the body of a tusker. Two more of the Dungeon beasts lay dead beside the corpse of his summoned creature. He looked at it in appreciation. The spider had fought well. He dismissed it. Whether that actually mattered now that it was dead he didn’t know, but he figured it still deserved to be returned home. A green disc appeared and the spider’s mangled body disappeared. The disc vanished right after, leaving no evidence of the arachnid except its victims.

Randolphus simply nodded that he was fine and looked around, seemingly unconcerned. The Spy’s calm face looked like they had been discussing ledgers in his office rather than fighting a pitched battle.

“Did we get all of them?” Richter asked.

“I believe so, my lord,” Randolphus responded. “There were thirty-

six tuskers initially. I slew eleven of the beasts.”

“I killed seven,” Sion chimed in. Sapir chimed in with pixiespeak, proud of his contribution to the battle.

“I got four,” Terrod threw in.

Richter did a quick count. There was the one he had killed with his moonstone arrow and the three he had coup de graced after the spider had attacked. He had killed the one on Terrod and then there was the one he had swung into the column. A pretty righteous slay in his opinion. He had been focusing his stat points more around magic, but there was something completely *man* about just hitting something real hard. That made six. Six... one less than Sion.

How many did you kill all together, my love? Richter thought to Alma sweetly.

She turned her sinuous head to look at him suspiciously from where she was flapping in mid-air. Something was behind his change in tone, but she didn’t know what, **Five, master, including the one I saved you from.**

“Saved” might be a strong word, Richter thought to her, **but thank you, love.**

Now that he knew her count, he added it to his own and threw in the three the arachnid had taken down for good measure. “I got fourteen,” he

proclaimed smugly.

Those were mine! Alma blasted at him. She flapped her wings at him in agitation, trumpeting her displeasure.

“What’s wrong with her?” Sion asked.

“Nothing,” Richter said, swatting Alma away. She easily dodged his arm and took a nip at him in response. He snatched his hand back, glaring daggers at his feisty familiar.

“She does seem quite agitated, my lord,” Randolphus commented. Terrod nodded, brow furrowed as he watched the dragonling.

Alma flew towards Sion quickly. The sprite took a half-step back in alarm, but stopped in surprise as she sent him a one-word psychic message. Then, a pure shit-eating grin bloomed on his face as he looked at Richter.

“What did she say?” Richter asked too loudly and already a touch defensively. His gaze darted back and forth between his best friend and his familiar.

Sion grandly drew in a breath before cocking his arm back like he was about to pitch the opening ball of the World Series. He threw his hand forward and pointed his forefinger at Richter, proclaiming loudly, “Thief!”

“What? No!” Richter protested immediately.

“She sent me one word,” Sion said, immensely enjoying himself, “‘Thief!’ Now are you,” Sion stated, pausing for dramatic effect, “or are you *not*, taking credit for her kills?”

“She’s my familiar,” Richter protested. “Her kills are my kills!”

Alma hissed at him.

“It appears she does not agree, my lord,” Randolphus chimed in. His tone was completely respectful, but there was a smarmy twinkle in his eyes. On second thought, Richter wasn’t so sure that he liked this new side of his chamberlain.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Sion said closing his eyes and waving his hands. He was staring right at Richter when he reopened them, “How many did you kill by yourself?”

“I don’t see the point in-” Richter began, but his best friend cut him off.

“How many?” Sion asked again loudly.

“Nine,” he responded. “Okay? Are you happy now? Nine.”

“That is a very respectable amount, my lord,” Terrod stated in a conciliatory tone. “And you saved me. There was no need to pad your numbers.”

“I wasn’t padding my numbers,” Richter spat. “She is my familiar, so her kills should count as mine.”

“There is precedent for this,” Randolphus interjected. “Some of the nobles I used to adventure with in Yves had strong pets. They counted the kills of their creatures as their own.”

“See,” Richter said to Sion, gesturing at Randy in validation.

“Those were usually the female Adventurers, however,” the chamberlain added.

Richter looked at him sharply again. Did this sumbitch just say he was hitting from the ladies’ tees? Randy’s tone was as respectful as ever, but that damn twinkle was in the man’s eye. Terrod muffled a laugh.

“Alright, alright. You got nine. I’ll stop teasing,” Sion said taking mercy. Then he looked sharply at Alma as she sent another message.

“Spider?” he said in confusion. Then his eyes widened in understanding and delight. All thoughts of clemency fled before the chance to mock his friend anew. “You included your summoned creature’s kills *too*?”

Richter opened his mouth to respond, but Sion held up a hand. He looked around and saw the three tuskars the arachnid had definitely killed and then said, “Six? Which means... you got less than me! Hahaha!”

“It was my summoned creature,” Richter said with some real heat in

his voice now. He felt like he had a completely valid point.

“Oh, yeah,” Sion told in an annoyingly sympathetic voice. “Sure.” He accompanied the admission with a pursing of his lips in a small moue, closing his eyes and nodding placatingly.

“You look like an asshole,” Richter snapped. Then he stopped for a moment and realized that pursed lips actually *did* look like an asshole. Was that where the phrase came from? He could almost see a gold star trailing a rainbow with the words “The More You Know” shooting across his brain.

“Whatever,” Sion said with a broad grin. “I keep telling you to stop trying to measure up. I am a sprite. You are a human.” He hitched up his belt, “Nothing wrong with you falling short. It’s a bloodline thing.”

Alma flew into the air with a toot of triumph over the trouble she had started. Richter glared at her retreating form. As he prepared to deliver a scathing reply to Sion, Randolphus interrupted, “I believe you should see this, my lord.” He was staring at the ground near one of the tuskers.

Richter cast a last dirty look at his former best friend then walked over to the carcass. He immediately saw what Randolphus had wanted him to see. The blood was flowing out of the body and into the ground. That was not overly surprising seeing as the creature had been stabbed to death, but the blood should have stopped actively flowing once the heart stopped. What

they were seeing was like the blood was being siphoned from the corpse. Once it hit the grass, it disappeared as the ground drank it. He looked at the nearby corpses and saw that the same thing was happening.

The chaos seed looked at his chamberlain. “Does this normally happen in a Dungeon?”

Randolphus slowly shook his head, “No, my lord. At least I have never before seen it happen. Dungeon creatures are reabsorbed over time, but I have never seen it occur so fast and never just the blood. I imagine it has to do with the Motivation you told us about, Blood Rite.”

They were all quiet as they observed the phenomenon.

Richter looked around at his Companions, “Just so I’m sure we’re all on the same page... my Dungeon is a vampire, right?”

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“‘Vampire’ might be too strong a word,” Randolphus responded hesitantly. He didn’t seem too sure, more like he was just sure he didn’t want to be standing inside a living Dungeon that wanted to drink his blood.

“Seems like a good description to me,” Sion spouted, still staring at the tusker’s body. All the blood had been drained out, leaving the eyes leaden and the insides of its lips a pale white. Not a speck was left on the ground that had hungrily drank the fluid. To make things even more creepy, the grass was growing. The turf had been churned up by the fight, but wherever the blood had been absorbed the furrows were disappearing under new grass. From where the sprite was standing, it was clear that the Dungeon fed on the blood to fuel its own regeneration.

“Like Randy said, we already know that one of the Dungeon’s Motivations is to get *rare* types of blood,” Richter said to diffuse the unsettling feeling they were all sharing. “Hell, it’s called the Dungeon of

Bloody Chaos. It's not too surprising that it might have a penchant for blood."

"A penchant for blood?" Sion asked with an incredulous expression on his face. When he said it again his voice was even louder, "A penchant for *blood*? Are you fucking serious? The earth we are standing on just drank almost forty tuskers dry, and it's happy about it!" Sion kicked a tuft of grass that was visibly growing taller and greener before their eyes.

"We all knew this place was going to be dangerous," Richter replied. For some irrational reason, the sprite kicking the grass was pissing him off. They might be in a sanguiphilic Dungeon, but that was no reason for Sion to fuck with his yard! "So far all it's done is drink the blood from its own monsters and fix the grass. What's so wrong with that?"

"Not just the monsters' blood, my lord," Terrod stated. "That is where I fell," he stated, pointing, "and that is where you fell," he said pointing again. The grass was rather green in both of those spots, Richter realized. When he walked closer there was no sign of blood.

The Dungeon Master started nodding to himself. Okay. That was a bit creepy. He figured there was nothing for it though, "Point taken. This is some weird stuff, but what does it change? I'm going to keep coming in here. Are you? I won't ever force any of you to come ever again if you don't

want to.”

Sion smiled, but this time with genuine friendship, “I was just, what is the expression, ‘busting your balls,’ brother. You know we are with you.”

Richter gave a short laugh, “Alright, let’s see what else we can find.” He summoned a mist worker and was about to order it to take some of the tuskers back to the surface when Terrod spoke up.

“I would like to make one request, my lord.”

“Yeah, man, whatever you need.”

Terrod hefted his shield. The durability had dropped by more than half and it was easy to see why. The tusker had left large holes in it, but what the captain was pointing to was the large wedge Richter’s elementum sword had made in the side.

“I said I was sorry about that,” Richter protested. He was more embarrassed than apologetic, but still, he had apologized.

“Which is most appreciated, my lord,” Terrod stated somewhat delicately. “I just thought that your chamberlain might give you some instruction. He seems quite adept at throwing small blades.”

“I would of course be happy to help, Lord Richter,” the chamberlain supplied. “I saw your, ahem, throw during the battle. I had planned on making this part of your instruction in any event.”

Richter's face adopted a slightly sour look, but there was no denying that his crappy throw could have taken off a few of Terrod's fingers. He sighed, "That's a good idea. What do I have to do?"

"Ahhh, Terrod and I are going to do some recon around the chamber while you learn," Sion told him. The sprite had no intention of being around his Companion while Richter learned to throw blades. He might not even want to be around after the man "learned."

"That is a great idea," the captain quickly agreed. The two of them tutted off to inspect the cavern.

Richter chuckled slightly, not blaming them, then turned his attention towards Randolphus. The first thing the chamberlain did was to teach Richter the proper grip. He made it clear that while a blade should be held solidly against his palm while swinging, a light touch was required for throwing. Richter's short swords were obviously not ideally suited, but they could still work. Even more importantly, after several throws and with Randolphus correcting his technique, a prompt appeared in the chaos seed's vision.

*You have learned the subskill: **Blade Throwing**. No longer is the length of your blade the range of your damage. "Let loose the steel bird and hear the bloody song it makes." Blade Throwing is a subskill of Small Blades.*

+2% *accuracy of thrown blades.* +2% *speed of thrown blades.*

It felt good to get a new skill, even if it was a subskill. Richter nodded to Randolphus and told him about the new development.

“Very good, my lord,” the Spy responded.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was a subskill I could learn and not just a technique?” Richter asked out of curiosity.

“I did not want you to be discouraged if you did not obtain it at first. While your skill progression is amazingly swift, it seems to take you, ah, a bit longer to initially grasp things than others.” Randolphus said with a completely straight face.

Richter blinked, at a loss for words. He was saved from having to respond by Sion calling him over. He started walking but then turned back to look at Randolphus again. The chamberlain still had the same zero fucks expression though, so Richter just kept it moving.

Sion was hidden from sight at first by a column. When Richter walked around it, he saw his friend was standing over the body of a tusker. What had caught the sprite’s attention was immediately apparent: an opaque red sphere the color of blood hovering over the body. It was about the size of a golf ball and its surface had a wet appearance to it. It looked like a slowly shifting ball of blood.

“What is it?” the chaos seed asked, intrigued and disgusted at the same time.

“I don’t know,” the sprite responded. “I’m just happy it’s not trying to drink my blood.”

Apparently, Sion still wasn’t completely over the whole “we’re standing in a vampire” thing. “Well, it doesn’t look like another creature,” Richter commented.

Randolphus walked up behind him and saw what they were looking at, then chuckled slightly, “It is not a danger. It is your reward.” Without further ado, he reached out and tapped the sphere. It disappeared as soon as he touched it. At the same time, coins materialized and dropped to the ground.

You have found: 2 Copper Coins

“Now you see the primary reason that Dungeons attract greedy adventurers: the promise of easy treasure. As a lure it is more than effective and ensures that the Dungeon is well fed.”

“Still,” Richter commented, “two coppers? Not exactly breaking the bank.”

His three Companions looked at each other in confusion.

“A bank is a very strong structure, my lord,” Randolphus supplied helpfully.

“They are also usually made of stone, which is much stronger than copper,” Terrod added.

“‘Fucking idioms’,” Sion chimed in, imitating Richter’s voice with a broad grin.

Never before had Richter felt as much love for the sprite as he did at that moment, “Thank you, Sion! What I *meant* was that two coppers isn’t very much.” When he had been playing The Land as a game, it had only been the equivalent of two bucks.

“I disagree, my lord,” Terrod put forward. “Keep in mind that most workers only make two to four silver a fortnight. This would be a full day’s wages for less than an hour’s work.”

“These beasts were also only level twelve to fourteen,” Randolphus supplied. “There is no guarantee that treasure will be provided when killing a Dungeon monster, but generally speaking, the stronger the monster slain, the better the items and coins provided will be.”

“I can follow that,” Richter told him, “but that raises another point. Why were the creatures such low levels? Except for captain slippery-feet

here,” he pointed at Terrod who raised his hands in betrayed protest, “and the one that blindsided me, we cleaned them up pretty easily. I was even able to pick one up and slam it into a column.” He looked around at his Companions with a smug smile on his face, “Did anyone see that? Did anyone see me go beast mode?”

Sion closed his eyes and let out a long-suffering sigh. He decided to ignore his friend, “Now that we know what those spheres are, we should check to see if there are any more.” The other two men nodded and they walked off to check the bodies. Richter just kept staring after them with a grin on his face.

“Yeah,” he finally said after a few seconds, “you saw it!”

They found another four spheres, meaning about 10% of the creatures slain provided treasure. The bounty was a few more coins and a health potion.

You have found: 1 Silver Coin and 7 Copper Coins

You have
found:
Health

Alchemy Class: Common

Alchemy Level: Tincture

Alchemy Strength: Clouded

Potion	Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Will restore 20 Health Points over 114 seconds.
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“Still kinda underwhelmed here,” Richter said as they looked at the haul. “I know what you said about the coins, and I agree, not bad for an hour’s work. This potion is crap though. I would get almost as much health just eating herbs.”

“Yet another reason to grow your Dungeon, my lord. If it grew a specialized Room like an Apothecary or a Poisoner’s Den, then you would start seeing potions appear more often and their quality would increase.” He looked at the red vial, “This mixture is a baseline tincture made without the touch of someone with the Alchemy skill. Remember that when someone with the skill makes a potion, each skill level they possess will increase the potion’s effect by 1.5%. Tabia, for instance, has reached level forty-five. Even outside of the perks of her Alchemist Profession, if she had made this potion it would restore nearly thirty-five points of health in less time.”

“But you still can’t tell me how to get a Room like that, right?” Richter asked. Randolphus just shrugged. He looked at this other Companions, but they had already lost any interest in the conversation.

“You’re sure there is no way to reason with it?” Richter asked. “The Bloodstone was self-aware after all, and now it’s the Dungeon’s Item of Power.”

Randolphus shook his head slowly with a thoughtful look on his face, “I have heard stories of conscious Dungeons, but I have never encountered one. In the tales I have heard, Dungeons capable of thought are usually the oldest and most powerful. Those stories are also frequently told as cautionary tales. Thought does not necessarily imply rational thought. The power and malevolence of a sapient Dungeon is a fearsome thing. Keep in mind, these are living creatures that feed upon us. They are monsters that are driven by two things, their Motivations and their hunger. We should be happy they are not governed by the same dark impulses and emotions as most humanoids.”

Hmm, the chaos seed thought. Good point. “Well, should we just divvy up the loot?” he asked.

“No, my lord,” Randolphus said forcefully. Richter looked at him in surprise. “You are the Master of these lands. This Dungeon belongs to you. I am proud to serve a lord who believes in fairness and provides for his people, but in this case, I must protect you from yourself. In Yves, the King requires all Adventurers to register their gear upon entering. When they leave, they must declare everything they have found. Enchanted archways

ensure that no one can covertly leave with more than they had when they entered. If they do, magical alarms sound and the thief may be summarily killed or imprisoned. Half of everything obtained in the Dungeon is given to the crown immediately and anything left over is taxed. If the Adventurers have joined a guild they may also be required to turn over up to 25% of their total haul as guild dues.”

Richter was taken aback by the pure graft of the enterprise, “Why would anyone agree to join a guild after they already had to give 50% of their treasure away?”

It was Terrod who answered, “Guilds have many advantages. For one thing, they can equip new Adventurers in better gear than they could afford otherwise, greatly improving their chances of survival. You must also remember that not everyone who enters a Dungeon is an Adventurer. Miners, herb collectors and many other noncombatants enter to farm resources. Guilds offer protection to these people while they work. It is also widely understood that Adventurers without a guild have a high chance for ‘accidents’ to befall them while they are inside.”

Richter had thought that he might have been being dramatic with the word “graft” when he had first thought it, but now he saw just how appropriate it was. “I am not going to do all of that. For one thing, not just anyone can enter. I won’t have my people dying if they can’t defend

themselves just because they want to make a few more coins.”

“Extremely sensible, my lord,” Randolphus replied. “I will draw up a clearly defined contract, but for now I propose the following. No one may enter alone. Additionally, they must be proficient fighters and be verified by yourself, sprite Sion, Captain Terrod or Sergeant Caulder. Half of anything they gather is given to you. For any item obtained, you may decide to take it and provide them with the equivalent value in hard currency, after a reasonable amount of taxation, of course. Miners and other resource gatherers that agree to enter the Dungeon will be given bonuses based on their productivity. Any bonus resources found, gems in an ore vein for instance, remain your property, your lordship, but gatherers will receive a generous one-time bonus for such discoveries.”

Richter’s mouth hung open slightly. Even Terrod and Sion had perked back up at hearing the chamberlain rattle off such a well thought-out series of rules. Once again, Randy illustrated just how invaluable he was. He had outlined the broad strokes of what was required, foreseen potential pitfalls and successfully put all that was needed into words. When you coupled that with his abilities as a Spy, Richter couldn’t help but think that the new King of Yves was a complete and utter fool for letting him go. It actually made Richter wonder if there was more to the story of the King’s ascension that he didn’t know. Why *would* anyone let a man like Randolphus

go?

Thinking about that reminded Richter that he needed to start taking more interest in the world at large. Now was not the time, however. They were still in the Dungeon which meant they were still in danger. They may have cleared the first room, but there was no guarantee more monsters wouldn't come from other parts of the Dungeon. Hell, for all Richter knew the tuskers might respawn. He had to keep his head in the game. There would always be time for questions later.

"That all sounds fine, as a general plan," Richter told his chamberlain. "You three are my Companions though. When we dungeon dive, we split things evenly. Agreed?"

Randolphus nodded in assent. It was clear to him that arguing would have been pointless. Terrod just stood by with a pleased look on his face. Sion didn't seem to care one way or another. The wood sprites had a hippie commune sort of economy as far as Richter could tell and never seemed to want coins. That idea was undercut a bit though when Sion offhandedly added, "If I ever need any money, I'll just let you know how much."

Richter didn't really like the sound of that, but the guy was his oldest ally and best friend. He pushed down his inner "frugality" and just responded, "Of course." He handed the potion to Terrod as the captain had

the least health of any of them. Then he doled out the coins between himself, the captain and Randolphus.

The chaos seed summoned another mist worker and had it load up with the bodies of tuskers. The meat seemed like a great boon on the eve of the upcoming party. Randolphus raised a note of caution however.

“Be careful of taking too many monsters from the Dungeon, my lord. It will reabsorb the bodies of its slain creatures and thereby regain some of the energy it expended creating them if they are left alone. Again, as Master of the Dungeon, it is in your best interests to grow it as quickly as possible. There are also myths of Dungeons becoming a bit... unhappy with those who take too many of its monsters.”

“Is there anything dangerous about eating Dungeon creatures? And what do you mean by unhappy?”

“There is nothing inherently dangerous about eating Dungeon creatures,” Randolphus told him. “As with all flesh, you must be careful. The meat of certain creatures can be diseased or poisonous, just as it would be if found outside of the dungeons. The Dungeon also might evolve its creatures in the future so as to make the meat dangerous. On the same token however, it could give the flesh certain properties that could be beneficial. You have already found that the meat from the rock giant you slew increased

Strength for a short time. Each will have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, but these tuskers should pose no danger. As far as the myth about angry Dungeons, I am sure it is just that.”

First the guy said unhappy and now he was saying angry. Not exactly the way to make him feel better. Richter couldn’t do anything about that now though. “Fair enough, then. We’ll take half the tuskers for the celebration tonight. We will have hundreds more mouths to feed, after all.”

“Then you do intend to include the freed captives in tonight’s festivities?”

“Yes,” Richter replied definitively. “I plan on offering them a home in the village, provided they pass Sumiko’s test of loyalty when she returns. That won’t be for several days, however, and I won’t keep them in captivity until she does.”

“Will you be giving them immunity to the mists tonight?” Terrod asked, concerned for the village’s security.

“Absolutely not,” Richter replied. He had learned his lesson with Sonirae, the Assassin that had infiltrated the village by posing as a victim. As lessons went, castration was a real powerful encouragement to not make the same mistake twice. “I am going to peel back the mists in that section of the village though. I won’t allow them to come into the western side. We

will bring the feast to them. I can't allow them to know about the Forge of Heavens or anything else, but I see no reason not to make them as comfortable as possible. If any decide to leave the village after Sumiko returns, or are just not a good fit, we will be able to get them to safety without worrying about them divulging our secrets to the outside world."

"Except for the Dungeon, which they all know about," Sion commented.

Richter sighed, "Except for that. I'm not willing to force anyone to stay against their will or kill them if they want to leave though. We will just have to hope for the best."

They all nodded and Randolphus spoke up, "I recommend we leave the Dungeon for now, my lord. The captain's shield is near useless with that large hole in it and this has been a successful initial foray. One thing that almost always holds true is that Dungeons grow more dangerous the farther in one goes. There is also more to be done before the celebration tonight. We can always return tomorrow."

Richer looked out at the forest of blood-red columns with a small bit of longing, but felt that the Spy was right. Even though the tuskers had only been level fourteen or below, they had still been dangerous. It was well past time to upgrade Terrod's gear. Which reminded him of his enchanting

responsibilities in the Forge. The battle with the undead was on the horizon and he had to enspell as many weapons and as much armor as he could before then.

“You’re right, as always, my chamberlain,” Richter responded wryly. Since the battle had ended he’d been able to summon six mist workers which were now carrying three or four tuskers each. The constructs might not be smart, but they were strong as hell. His Ring of Summoning once again showed its worth by letting him conjure level eight mist workers rather than mere level ones. It drastically increased the already prodigious Strength and stamina of the faceless creatures. With the workers in tow, the four Companions and two small fliers left the Dungeon.

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The party crossed back into the Entrance Chamber and then used the Node to instantly travel back to the mouth of the Dungeon. The bodies of the remaining tuskers began to degrade as soon as they left. At first, all that could be seen was hair falling away, but soon the muscles began liquefying and running down into the ground. The earth greedily drank the fluid and the grass itself began to grow into the carcasses, lightly but insistently pulling the tissues apart.

The bones soon began to crumble and flake as well. Pieces fell to the ground and sank like stones through porridge, slowly but inexorably. In minutes, there was no sign of the dead. The entity that was the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos then turned its attention towards the balls of light left behind, draining the mana from each until they winked out, one by one. After that, it began creating more creatures to replace those that had been lost. It instinctually created a mixture of jenit prowlers and koran tuskers to populate

the central chambers this time. The ever-present hunger of the Dungeon spurred it to try new tactics. It did not understand that it was trying to become more dangerous; it just knew deep in its being that it wanted to feed. This instinct would drive it to try different combinations of monsters until it could slay those that entered it.

The Dungeon could feel the energy pulsing inside of the four beings that had just left its domain. It had a primal craving to obtain that energy for itself. One of the creatures in particular confused it. It had felt like part of the Dungeon, but also different from the Dungeon. Such deep thoughts were beyond its ability or interest, however, and soon it forgot. It would one day consume him the same as any other. Hunger took over again as its overarching concern. Though it had absorbed a small amount of blood essence from two of the Adventurers, it was not nearly enough to compensate for the energy it had lost from the slain beasts. The invaders had even taken half of its creatures.

A strange stimulus triggered inside of the Dungeon with that errant thought. The sensation was there and gone in a split second. It searched itself, looking for a cause, wondering if it had been attacked. Again, it was not made for such considerations and soon turned its attention to other inner workings. A word had occurred to it that seemed to describe the sensation, but as it had no frame of reference, it disregarded the “irritation” it had felt.

CHAPTER 28 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



While Richter and his Companions walked back into the village, he addressed the prompts that had come up during the Dungeon dive.

*You have been awarded **8,012** experience (base 91,564 x 0.07 x 1.25) from Brain Drain against Level 13 Koran Tusker.*

You have captured:	Durability: 15/15
Soul of a Koran Tusker	Item Class: Common
	Stone Level: Common
	Soul Level: Basic
	Status: Filled
	Weight: 0.2 kg

The rewards were modest, but they were still something, Richter thought. There was a time when eight thousand XP would have been

something to crow about. It only took a thousand XP to move from level one to level two, after all. Now that he was level thirty-five, even after adding in the eight thousand he still needed more than three hundred thousand points to level up again.

The souls he had gained were also nothing big, but should be good for simple enchantments or refilling the charges on his already-enchanted items. The enchantment ranks were *poor, weak, basic, common, higher, brilliant, special, resplendent, transcendent* and *absolute*. The highest ranked soul he had seen so far was *resplendent*. It had come from a Cloud Giant and that single soul had cost him six hundred and fifty gold pieces. As far as Richter had been able to tell, the rank of the soul was based on the type of creature and not its level. Unless the Dungeon got stronger monsters, it wouldn't be of much use for farming higher level souls. Yet another reason why he should grow his Dungeon as fast as possible, he supposed.

The party quickly reached the gate to the village. The guards posted there brought their fists to their chests in salute. Richter noticed that they held the pose not only until he passed, but until Sion, Terrod and Randolphus passed as well. It appeared that his burgeoning village was indeed developing its own small aristocracy. They all lived together, slept in the same place and ate the same food, but there was no denying the respect on the guards' faces. The more Richter thought about it, the more he realized

that he had been seeing evidence of this over the past weeks. He didn't disagree or disapprove.

Each of his Companions had played pivotal roles in the settlement's maturation. Their responsibilities had become even more important as time went on. Terrod was in charge of more than a hundred fighters these days and Sion had almost a hundred meidon sprites that would follow his every order. Randolphus had been Richter's number two from almost day one and now would be one of his primary teachers. Some of the villagers gave the chamberlain odd looks, seeing him in his armor and knives rather than his customary robes, but he walked with such surety that the battle dress only cemented his authority. It occurred to Richter that a year ago the idea of living with nobles, letting alone almost being one, would have seemed ludicrous. Now though, it wasn't just something he enjoyed. It felt right.

Randy took charge of the mist workers. He said he would get the tuskers to the cooks and would see to other preparations for the night's festivities. The Spy looked at Richter a bit strangely when his lord told him that he wanted the carcasses put on spits that could be slowly turned over fire pits.

The chaos seed just smiled though and said, "Trust me." He was getting excited about the idea of some BBQ pork. In fact... "Tell the cooks to put a sweet glaze on it if possible."

The chamberlain just nodded with a bemused look on his face and walked off, mist workers in tow. Sion and Terrod both left on their own business as well. Sapir sped off towards the Quickening to brag about his harrowing battle to his brothers and sisters.

Richter turned his head to look at Alma, **Are you staying with me, little one?**

Where are you going? she asked sassily.

Richter chuckled inside his own head at her tone, **I need to enchant some weapons.**

Yuck! Stinky dwarves. Without another mental word, she flew off to amuse herself.

She really was getting feisty these days, Richter thought with a smirk. As he was finally alone, he decided to address his points. They were just begging to be spent, after all. Richter accessed his Profession status page.

A translucent screen that had a star-filled backdrop appeared in his vision. Two different sets of globes floated above the expanse. The central sphere on the left was blue and it had the word “Enchanter” emblazoned across its surface. Six globes sprouted off the hub and more branched off from each of those. Even more branched off from that second tier. The

constellation on the right was much smaller, just one red central sphere and the four radiating out from it forming a diamond. The word “Essence” was etched onto the surface of the red sphere.

The blue globes on the left were Talents of his Enchanter Profession while the red globes on the right were the Talents of his Essence Specialty. Most of the spheres on the left were glowing, indicating that Richter had purchased at least one rank in them. He reviewed his list of purchased Talents, the information appearing summarized on a table for him under the constellation of blue globes. Next to the name of each Talent was a letter and a number. It was easy enough to follow that the letter described one of the six tier-one Talents branching off of the central blue sphere. The numbers indicated how many tiers each Talent was from the center. *Increase Enchantment Potential* branched off the central sphere, for instance, while *Synergy of Items* and *Identify Enchantment* branched off *Increase Enchantment Potential*. The ranks described how many times he’d invested points into that particular Talent.

Profession Talent	Rank	Effect
Increase Enchantment Potential (A1)	I	Increases enchantment slots by +10%
Synergy of Items (A2)	I	Allows for the creation of items sets. The

		base items must have something in common for the enchantments to feed off one another
Identify Enchantment (A2)	II	Allows the enchanter to identify magical items from a distance. Can identify more powerful items.
Increase Enchantment Success (B1)	I	Increases chance of an enchantment taking hold by +20%
Faster Creation Time (B2)	I	Create magic books, scrolls and skill books 10% faster
Soul Bound Object (B2)	I	Creates a weak soul bond to your objects. Only the one bound to a soul bound item can use its enchantment.
Fortify Health/Mana/Stamina (B2)	I	Enchantments dealing with increasing health, mana and stamina are 20% more effective
Increase Enchantment	I	Increases potency of all enchantments by

Strength (C1)		+5%
Increase Weapon Enchantment (C2)	I	Increases potency of weapons enchantments by +10%
Increase Armor Enchantment (C2)	I	Increases potency of armor enchantments by +10%
Increase Item Enchantment (C2)	I	Increases potency of item enchantments by +10%
Increase Number of Charges (D1)	I	Enchanted items you create have +10% number of charges or +10 charges (whichever is more)
Increase the Maximum Number of Soul Stones (D2)	I	Can use an additional soul stone during enchantment
Increase Soul Stone Yield (D2)	I	Increases Soul Stone yield by 25%
Macroenchantment	I	Enchantments may now affect larger

(E1)		areas such as buildings, ships, engines of war, and other grand projects
Deconstruct Items (F1)	I	You may now deconstruct enchanted items. There is a chance of salvaging raw materials
Resize Items (F2)	I	You can now alter the allowed size of an enchanted item by one rank. Decreased chance of item being destroyed or enchantment being lost during resizing.

A similar summary list floated beneath the five red spheres of his Essence Specialty.

Specialty Talent	Rank	Effect
Unlock Spell Schools	I	Unlocks various spell schools to convert known spells into enchantments: -Basic Element spell schools require 10

		<p>Talent Points to unlock</p> <p>-Deeper Magic spell schools require 100</p> <p>Talent Points to unlock</p> <p>-Higher Energy spell schools require 1000</p> <p>Talent Points to unlock</p> <p><u>Unlocked Spell Schools:</u></p> <p><i>Earth</i> – Can now convert known Earth Spells into enchantments</p>
<p>Reduce Mana Cost</p> <p>Upgrade Cost:</p> <p>30</p>	I	<p>To translate a spell into an enchantment, a mana cost must be paid. Current conversion cost is 100x spell mana cost</p>
<p>Purchase Spell Enchantment</p> <p>Upgrade Cost:</p> <p>40</p>	I (STATIC)	<p>Basic Element spells cost 1 Talent Point per spell level</p> <p>Deeper Magic spells cost 10 Talent Points per spell level</p> <p>Higher Energy spells cost 100 Talent Points per spell level</p>

Talent Point Conversion Upgrade Cost: 175	IV	Can expend Experience Points to purchase Talent Points Conversion: 7,000 XP: 1 Talent Point Penalty to earning XP back: 100% harder
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The power of his Specialty was that he could turn any spell that he knew into an enchantment. In light of his Limitless ability, it meant that given time and enough spell books, he could make an enchantment for any scenario. The rate-limiting factor was that each spell cost Talent Points to unlock. He first had to pay to unlock a spell school. Each Basic Element cost ten Talent Points each. Unlocking a Deeper Magic school, such as Blood, Thought or Spirit, cost a daunting one hundred TPs.

Even when the spell school was unlocked, each spell he converted to an enchantment cost him even more Talent Points. The Basic Element spells cost him one TP per level of the spell. *Weak Sonic Wail*, for instance, as a level six Earth spell, had cost him six TPs. When most Professionals could only count on ten TPs per level and Specialists only another five, Essence would be an almost useless path for most Enchanters to take. One of the Talents of his Specialty, *Purchase Spell Enchantment*, could be upgraded to

reduce the number of Talent Points to convert each spell into an enchantment. That, of course, cost even more Talent Points, however. His Specialty was a voracious monster.

To compensate for his Talent Point-hungry Specialty, it had an extremely versatile Talent though: *Talent Point Conversion*. He could purchase Talent Points at the cost of his own experience. There was a great deal he didn't know about Professions, but his Talent seemed unique from what he had learned so far. Even among Enchanters it was rare to become an Essence Enchanter, apparently. It required that someone both have the Enchanter Profession and be Master of a Place of Power. Richter couldn't imagine that occurred too often.

He had already invested a hundred and seventy-five Talent Points into upgrading *Talent Point Conversion* to the fourth rank. It was by far his most advanced Talent, but it had been worth it. Each rank he purchased improved the conversion ratio. At rank one it had cost ten thousand Experience Points to buy only one Talent Point. At rank four, that ratio had improved to seven thousand to one.

All of these were things he already knew. What was shocking about the prompts were the newest additions. This was the first time he had looked at his Profession since obtaining his new Chaos Magic spell. He could create Higher Energy enchantments now! His excitement lasted for about zero

point four seconds, which was when he saw the Talent Point cost. One *thousand* Talent Points? Were they serious? It was clear he wouldn't be making weapons with chaotic enchantments anytime soon.

Still, he had one hundred and sixty-one Talent Points to invest. He needed to decide where they would go. He assessed his Specialty Talents first. He had always been a "late game" player. He had forgone momentary boosts and benefits for large yields once the board was more developed. The downside to that was that it made him easy prey to other players when he was first starting. If he could make it through the fragile early days though, his planning usually made him a powerhouse in the end game.

Though the decisions he made in The Land were life-and-death, he still thought his tactics were sound. The only problem was that ignoring the "now" didn't mean just getting frustrated and having to buy his friends a beer. Mistakes he made now could cost the lives of hundreds of people who relied on him. His capabilities as an Enchanter could mean the difference between life and death for his people. That was a responsibility that was never far from his mind.

He decided to break with tradition and buy something that would give a short-term boost. When he had first gained his Specialty, upgrading the *Reduce Mana Cost* Talent had seemed frivolous. Even after he had gone through all the steps to convert a spell into an enchantment, it was still

unavailable to him initially. He had to invest a large amount of mana to “unlock” it. The cost was one hundred times however much mana the spell cost to cast. *Weak Sonic Wail*, for instance, cost twenty-seven mana to cast. He had needed to invest twenty-seven hundred mana to unlock the associated enchantment.

Put another way, all it required to unlock an enchantment was mana and time. With his hefty forty-five points of Wisdom, he regenerated almost two thousand mana an hour. The thirty Talent Points required to upgrade *Reduce Mana Cost* had seemed like an idiotic waste. All he needed was patience, right?

That was until he learned that after unlocking the first level of an enchantment, he could then unlock level two. When he had unlocked *Sonic Damage*, it had been rank one and level one. The rank had increased from one to three as he had practiced the enchantment at the Forge of Heavens. Increasing the rank had increased the base damage from +1 to +3 and had also made it more likely for the enspelled weapon to trigger the special ability of the enchantment, *Disarm*. *Disarm* did exactly what it sounded like. It could force an opponent’s weapon to shoot right out of their hand. More than a few of his enemies had died a moment after that happened, shocked looks on their faces.

The more he used an enchantment at the Forge, the more likely it was

that he could unlock higher ranks to enspell with. No matter how much he practiced though, it would remain at level one. He wasn't sure exactly what a level two enchantment did, but that just put it in the same category as a foursome with triplets; he knew he wanted one.

What he did know was that while unlocking the first level of an enchantment cost one hundred times the spell cost, unlocking level two cost ten *thousand* times the spell cost. He had been working on getting to level two of *Sonic Damage* for more than a month. While twenty-seven hundred was not much, needing to allocate two hundred and seventy thousand mana to unlock the enchantment was a major commitment. Considering the fact that *Weak Sonic Wail* was also one of his cheapest spells... Richter spent the Talent Points.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Reduce Mana Cost** for 30 Talent Points.*

*Conversion cost to unlock known enchantments is now **80x** the mana cost of the root spell. You now possess Rank I in Reduce Mana Cost. Progression to Rank II will cost 60 Talent Points.*

*You have: **131 Talent Points** remaining.*

As soon as he purchased the talent, Richter received an awesome surprise.

*Know This! Purchasing **Reduce Mana Cost, Rank I** has decreased the mana*

*necessary to learn the enchantment **Sonic Damage, Level II** from 270,000 mana to 216,000. As you have already invested this amount, you have successfully unlocked the second level of your enchantment. The 45,834 excess mana points you invested have been lost to the ether. Plan better in the future.*

That last part seemed completely unnecessary to the chaos seed. Also, just kind of a dick thing to say either way, but he didn't really care. He had a level two enchantment! More prompts appeared in his vision, the same green color as Earth magic. A smile graced his lips as he started reading. *Congratulations! You have obtained your first level two Enchantment: **Sonic Damage**.*

*Know This! Your progression in **Sonic Damage, Level I** to **Rank III** is sufficient to advance you **to Rank II in Sonic Damage, Level II**. You may practice either of these enchantments but it is significantly more difficult to advance in rank for higher level enchantments. Advancing higher level enchantments also advances the corresponding lower level enchantments at the same time.*

You have learned the enchantment **Sonic Damage, Level II, Rank II**

Enchantment Size: 4

Enchantment School: Earth

Effect 1: *Increased Damage* – Each rank increases Sonic (Earth) damage by +2

Effect 2: *Disarm* – When triggered, opponents may lose their weapon. +2% chance of enchantment triggering on successful strike per rank.

Higher ranks also increase the likelihood of weapon loss when enchantment is triggered.

Effect 3: *Shatter* – The sonic vibrations caused by this enchantment can now destroy the cohesion of whatever is struck. This effect can destroy a weapon or a piece of armor. The shards from the ruined item will shoot back towards the unfortunate soul that was attacked causing massive damage. +1% chance per rank. Higher ranks also increase the damage of shattered weapons and materials of higher density can be shattered.

Requirements:

Novice rank in Earth Magic

Initiate rank in Enchanting

Richter was beyond excited, but was also surprised. This was the first enchantment he'd ever gained that had requirements. Luckily, he fulfilled both easily, but it did add another factor to consider. It would suck he invested a month of time and mana into unlocking a higher-level

enchantment only to find that he couldn't use it. That was a concern for another time though. For now, he had more prompts to read.

Know This! Unlocking the second level of this enchantment has increased the damage to its opposite:

Damage vs Air increased from **+100%** to **+200%**

Damage vs Crystalline increased from **+150%** to **+300%**

You have now unlocked the enchantment **Sonic Damage, Level III**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Earth

You are currently at 0/21,600,000 for the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

There was a part of Richter's mind that multicolored lights danced in. These lights represented the enchantments that he knew. He had always found it odd that the way he envisioned them was the same way they physically looked in the central elementum anvil in the Forge of Heavens.

Upon gaining his level two enchantment, one of the green motes split into two. These two green lights continued to dance, but now they circled each other, as if they were binary planets revolving around an invisible sun. The chaos seed only noted this anecdotally however, because he was engrossed in just how powerful his upgraded enchantment was!

For starters, the first two effects had doubled in strength. That, by itself, made the second level of the enchantment worth the time and mana he had invested into it. The only downside was that the enchantment size had increased. Captured souls powered every enchantment, but each soul was only so powerful. Each Soul Point they provided equated to one Enchantment Point.

Poor souls came from small animals such as rats, fish or sparrows and provided only one Soul Point. *Common* souls came from weak monsters and provided ten points each. Higher level souls provided even more but were much, much harder to come by.

Every rank of an enchantment made it more powerful but also cost substantially more Enchantment Points. He had long ago compiled a simple chart for how much successive ranks cost based on their initial enchantment cost. The difference between a cost of three and four, for instance, grew extremely pronounced as the ranks progressed.



Rank of Enchantment	Enchantment Cost: 3	Enchantment Cost: 4
1	3	4
2	6	8
3	12	16
4	21	28
5	33	44
6	48	64
7	66	88
8	87	116
9	111	148
10	138	184

While there wasn't much difference in the early ranks, the cost at higher ranks built on the initial enchantment cost.

Even with the increased enchantment cost, the second level of *Sonic Damage* was worth it as far as Richter was concerned. It might cost +33% more Enchantment Points to reach rank five, but the damage from the

enchantment would be increased by +100%. Moderately higher cost for a substantially better reward was an idea he could get behind. It was the same slogan he'd seen for a Vegas whorehouse once.

Even outside of the increase in power for the first two effects, the third effect alone was worth the mana he had spent. *Shatter* was incredible. The fact that it could remove an opponent's weapon and harm him at the same time was powerful. The idea that it could do the same thing to a breastplate though was a game-changer. He could envision a chestplate shattering and the shrapnel flying back through his enemy like a shotgun. He couldn't wait to try it.

That speculative part of him stopped again, wondering if The Land had turned him into a sociopath. The idea of making weapons of war that could turn sapient creatures into sausage was something that would have bothered him once. At the very least, it would have given him pause. A small part of him thought that his excitement over his new enchantment was cause for concern. Every other part of him didn't care or didn't have time for whining though, so once again, the speculation was shut down. There was work to be done.

Richter considered for a second starting to unlock level three of *Sonic Damage*, but twenty-one *million* mana was an insane amount of magic to invest. At his current mana regen rate, it would take more than a year of him

devoting every point he could make to unlock it. That was even taking into account the fact that a year in The Land was much longer than a year on Earth. It was clear that he would need to upgrade *Reduce Mana Cost* several more ranks if he was serious about evolving his enchantments to level three. The chaos seed dismissed the green prompts still hovering in his vision. He was about to access his Talent page again, but another notification appeared.

Well done, **Essence Enchanter!** You have progressed along the path of your Profession. Far too many call themselves Professionals with no real concept of honoring their calling. To have a Profession is to hold power, but also to be burdened with responsibility.

You have uncovered and completed a hidden Quest of your Profession:

The Depths of Enchantment I

Reward: 10 Talent Points.

*You have: **141 Talent Points** remaining.*

You have been offered a Quest: **The Depths of Enchantment II**

Success Conditions: Continue to grow in power by learning 5 Level II enchantments. Current Count: 1/5.

Reward: 20 Talent Points.

Penalty for Failure: None.

This is a Quest of your Profession and cannot be refused.

He really did love it when a plan came together, he thought with a smile. With his TPs bolstered, he turned his attention back to his Talent page. The first thing he had to decide on was what new enchantment to purchase. Time was passing, and every minute he wasn't unlocking a new ensorcellment was mana going to waste. With over seventy spells at his fingertips, there were a myriad of options. He already knew *Life Attack* and had even reached rank three in it. His *Weak Flame* spell would almost definitely give the *Fire Attack* enchantment which could also do some serious damage against the undead they were about to fight. *Weak Paralysis Beam* was attractive for the same obvious reason. Even if the paralysis lasted only a second, that would be enough to turn the tide of almost any fight. He was also geeking out with curiosity of what enchantments his summoning spells would give.

As always, his practical side won out... when it didn't come to women or whiskey. He chose the spell that he probably should have picked first.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Unlock Spell School: Life Magic** for 10*

Talent Points. You may now convert your known Life Magic spells into Enchantments.

*You have: **131 Talent Points** remaining.*

He would definitely be converting more of his Life spells into enchantments to prepare for the battle against the lich lord, so buying this Talent was inevitable. After paying one more TP, he received another notification, but there was a surprising difference to when he had purchased a spell for conversion in the past.

*You have chosen to purchase the enchantment for: **Soul Trap**. This enchantment can be applied to multiple mediums: **Items, Armor, and Weapons**. You must choose which medium you wish to unlock. Unlocking further mediums will require separate purchases with Talent Points.*

When Richter had obtained his *Sonic Damage* enchantment, he had seen a line that said the enchantment could only be applied to weapons. He had been so excited to start enchanting he had barely paid attention. It had also made sense. Why would he want to put the enchantment on a chestplate or a helmet? In retrospect, a gauntlet might work for punching, but still, he had had other things on his mind. Now that he was faced with the choice of items, armor or weapons, he wasn't sure which one to pick. He had initially thought to learn the weapon enchantment.

If he could spend a few hours enchanting several hundred arrowheads, he could give them out to his hunters. The greatest limiting factor in mass producing enchantments was a lack of captured souls. Only a handful of his hunters had Life Magic and they were the only ones that could cast *Soul Trap* before making a kill. That meant they were the only ones that were bringing him filled soul stones on a regular basis. While their efforts were greatly appreciated, it was a trickle. What Richter needed was a river. With the enchanted arrowheads, and with the help of the sprites, the chaos seed knew he could solve that problem.

His natural curiosity couldn't help but consider what enchantments he could get if he bought the enchantment for "items," though. Could he make a ring that cast the spell? And what about "armor"? Did it mean that any creature that hit him was risking its very soul? That sounded insanely cool to Richter. Like Pulp Fiction, Sam Jack, cool! "Don't touch me bitch, I'll snatch the soul outcha body!" He had heard people say that at various times in his life, but he would be the first person to actually *mean* it. He knew he was grinning like an idiot, but he sooo didn't care.

Still, "Practical Richter" reared his ugly head. There was work to be done and time was "a-wastin." He chose "weapons" and additional prompts appeared.



You have now purchased the (Weapons) enchantment: **Soul Trap**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/2,400 of the mana cost to unlock this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

You have: 130 Talent Points remaining.

Richter allocated his mana regeneration to unlocking the enchantment once his pool was full. He also invested five hundred points of the village mana pool to get a jump on things. With only nineteen hundred mana remaining, he should be able to unlock the enchantment within an hour. He wished that he could take more from the village stores, but ever since the bugbear attack he just wasn't comfortable if there wasn't a healthy buffer in the pool at all times to maintain the defensive mists around the settlement.

He was about to purchase another Talent when a wonderful thought occurred to him. He sent a mental call to Alma. The dragonling immediately complained, but with a firm tone, he told her to bring her scaly butt back pronto. With a petulant tone, she said she was flying back. With a smile on his face, both because of his idea and because he enjoyed messing with his

familiar, he tried something for the first time. He waited until she was within two hundred yards of him then accessed her *Psi Channeling* ability.

It was by far her least used ability, but it offered up very interesting possibilities. Even a novice magician could do some real damage if they knew the right spells, but there were serious limitations as well. Most spells had a cooldown time which meant they couldn't be cast back-to-back. Magicians were essentially neutered if they ran out of mana. Compounding those two major weakness, low-level offensive spells seemed to have a fairly short range. *Weak Flame*, for example, only worked within five feet.

Even his *Weak Fireball* spell, which required an *initiate* rank in Fire Magic, only had a max attack range of one hundred yards. Any reasonably decent archer could pick a mage off at a distance before the caster could bring his spells to bear. Psi Channeling fixed that problem. It allowed him to use Alma's position as the focal point of a spell as long as she was within two hundred yards of him. That meant he could hit an enemy up to three hundred yards away with his *Weak Fireball* now. When he had upgraded the ability to level two, a new facet had appeared. They could now transfer mana to each other, albeit at a loss of three to one. Despite the crap conversion rate, she had eight hundred and twenty points of mana and her regen rate was almost fifty a minute.

He siphoned off her mana, which elicited the expected mental cry of

protest from the dragonling. Richter didn't even bother to respond, just excited that he had gotten another two hundred and forty MPs to invest into his enchantment. He could have taken more, but would have felt bad giving his little familiar a mana headache. As she continued to complain in his head though, he amended his sentiment to "he'd feel bad even if she wasn't just an annoying flying rat sometimes."

He did a little math and realized that even with the transfer penalty, she could augment his own mana regen rate by another sixteen points a minute. He would be done in... just over half an hour. Richter had arrived at the Forge while dealing with his prompts, but there were no items ready to be enchanted. It was with a light heart that he turned his attention back to his Talent page.

Weak Life Armor was his next purchase. The spell increased the defense of every piece of armor the target was wearing by +1. That wasn't much, but it was especially effective against Death creatures, giving +3 defense. He imagined the enchantment would do the same.

For a moment, he considered converting *Weak Life Aura* instead. It surrounded the target in a shell of Life magic that discomforted weaker undead that got close to it. The golden aura would also cause direct damage to any Death creatures that came into direct contact with it. It was a more offensive choice, and could come in handy, but he only had so many Talent

Points to go around. Richter decided to invest more in defense. The aura was high on his list of spells to convert though.

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Weak Life Armor**. This enchantment can be applied to only one medium: **Armor**.*

You have now unlocked the (Armor) enchantment: **Life Defense**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/2400 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

*You have: **125 Talent Points** remaining.*

With that done, Richter turned his attention from his Specialty Talents to those of his Profession. He wished he had enough to upgrade *Talent Point Conversion* again. If he did, he'd empty his experience bank again and buy as many TPs as possible. The next rank of the Talent cost a whopping one hundred and seventy-five points though. It just wasn't in the cards right now.

He reexamined the nebula that held his Profession and Specialty. Many of the spheres were lit, but a few remained dark showing that he hadn't

purchased the first rank of that particular Talent. In addition to not being able to benefit from them, it also meant that the next sphere in the chain was still hidden from him. Richter decided to buy a Talent that would reveal more of his Profession tree. There were two dark spheres leading off *Increase Weapon Enchantment*, which boosted the strength of his weapon enchantments by +10%.

Both dealt with the additional effects of his enchantments like *Disarm* or *Shatter*. Both would make his enchantments deadlier and both had a filament leading off into the fog indicating that when he purchased them, even more hidden Talents would be revealed. He bought the one on the left.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Increase Additional Effect Power** for 20 Talent Points. The additional effects of an enchantment (eg Burning from Fire Damage) are now +10% more powerful. This will increase both the strength of the effect and the likelihood to overcome the target's resistance to the effect. You are currently Rank I in Increase Additional Effect Power.*

Progressing to Rank II will cost 40 Talent Points.

*You have: **105 Talent Points** remaining.*

The sphere lit up with an inner light, glowing cheerfully against the starscape background. The fog surrounding the sphere pulled back, but the filament leading away from his new Talent still trailed off into the obscuring

mist. No new Talent was revealed. Richter frowned slightly. This had happened once before, when he had purchased *Increase Armor Enchantment*. All he could think was that whatever Talent was next in the chain had additional requirements he had to meet before it was revealed.

It was slightly disappointing, but he had still gotten a new Talent. The additional effects were already game changers. An opponent that was suddenly immolated, frozen solid or stunned into immobility lost interest in fighting for some reason. *Increase Additional Effect Power* would make those effects even more powerful. Richter moved on to the other Talent that branched off from *Increase Weapon Enchantment*.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Increase Additional Effect Chance** for 20 Talent Points. The additional effects of an enchantment (eg Burning from Fire Damage) are now more likely to trigger. Secondary effects are +25% more likely and Tertiary effects are +10% more likely. You are currently Rank I in Increase Additional Effect Chance. Progressing to Rank II will cost 40 Talent Points.*

*You have: **85 Talent Points** remaining.*

The sphere lit up, same as the first. This time when the fog rolled back, however, it revealed a new Talent. Richter's earlier irritation faded because he saw now that he'd been right. The filaments from the Talents he

had just purchased led to the same sphere. He had just needed to buy them both in order to reveal it. As he read about the new Talent, the ghost of a smile crossed his face. It had been worth it.

*Congratulations! You have uncovered a new Talent: **Advance in Rank I.***

*Every enchantment you know will be able to be enchanted by you at one rank higher than would otherwise be possible. Cost: **40 Talent Points.***

For forty Talent Points every enchantment he knew, or would come to know, could be used at a higher rank! As excited as he was, he made himself calm down and think. Forty Talent Points was no small amount. Even with all the bonuses from his Limitless ability, he only received thirty Talent Points per level. It was also much harder to level now than it used to be. His eyes scanned the rest of his Talent tree, but he *felt* like this was the right choice. Richter wasn't one to hesitate. He made his choice.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Advance in Rank I.** +1 to rank of all enchantments. You are currently Rank I in Advance in Rank. Progressing to Rank II will cost 80 Talent Points.*

*You have: **45 Talent Points** remaining.*

As soon as he bought the Talent, another window appeared.

*Know This! All known enchantments are increased in rank by +1 due to your Talent **Advance in Rank.** Your known enchantments **without** this bonus are:*

Name (cost)	Level/Rank	Base Effect per Rank
<i>WEAPONS</i>	<i>WEAPONS</i>	<i>WEAPONS</i>
Attack +1 (5)	STATIC	Increases attack by +1
Freeze (3)	I/IV	+1 Cold Damage (+2 vs Fire) +1% chance to <i>Freeze</i>
Life Attack (2)	I/III	+1 Life Damage (+2 vs Death)
Ignore Defense (3)	I/I	Ignores +2% of Target's Defense
Goblin Slaying (3)	I/IV	+6% Damage vs Goblins
Dark Attack (3)	I/I	+1 Dark Damage (+2 vs Light)
Beast Slaying (3)	I/III	+6% Damage vs Beasts
Sonic Damage (Level I: 3) (Level II: 4)	I/III	+1 Earth Damage (+2 vs Air, +2.5 vs Crystalline) +1% chance to <i>Disarm</i>
	II/II	+2 Earth Damage (+4 vs Air, +6 vs Crystalline)

		+2% chance to <i>Disarm</i> +1% chance to <i>Shatter</i>
Multishot (5)	I/II	Creates 1 extra projectile upon being shot
Confusion (2)	I/I	+1% chance to cause <i>Confusion</i>
<i>ARMOR</i> <i>ARMOR</i> <i>ARMOR</i>		
Earth Resistance (2)	I/I	Increases Earth Resistance by +1%
Defense +2 (10)	STATIC	Increases Defense by +2
Increase Movement Speed (4)	I/II	Increases Movement Speed by 1%
Increase Unarmed Attack Damage (3)	I/I	Increases Unarmed Attack Damage by 5%
<i>GENERAL</i> <i>GENERAL</i> <i>GENERAL</i>		
Durability (2)	I/I	Increases Durability by +10

Some of the enchantments had colored backgrounds to indicate what

spell schools they came from. Some apparently were generic though, which made Richter wonder if that meant there were some that even his Essence Specialty couldn't provide. If the enchantments weren't based on spells, how could he learn them? He shook his head. Just one more matter to be worried about at another time.

There was another prompt waiting to be read that showed the enchantments that were contained in the Forge of Heavens that he hadn't learned yet.

Name (cost)	Level/Rank	Base Effect per Rank
<i>WEAPONS</i>	<i>WEAPONS</i>	<i>WEAPONS</i>
Tracking (2)	I/I	Struck creatures leave an obvious trail for 250 yards
Analysis (4)	I/I	Know information about struck creature. Depth of knowledge dependent upon multiple factors including, but not limited to, rank of enchantment, level of creature, etc.
Mana Stealing (3)	I/I	2 mana stolen per hit

Metal Decay (4)* * Can also apply to Armor	I/I	0.1 points of durability damage per charge expended
<i>ARMOR</i>	<i>ARMOR</i>	<i>ARMOR</i>
Shockwave (10)	I/I	Increases Spell Strength of <i>Shockwave</i> by +5 (base 5)
Darkvision (2)	I/I	Provides 10 yards of Darkvision
Increase Attack Speed (4)	I/I	Increases Attack Speed by 1%

For just forty points, every one of his enchantments had jumped a rank. Of course, that didn't mean that he *had* to enspell anything up to its max rank. In all honesty, he probably wouldn't, due to a lack of captured souls. The fact that he now had the option to make more powerful enchantments though was awesome! *Mana Stealing* and *Confusion* in particular had been neglected by him for far too long, and *Multishot* could also be powerful.

He turned his attention back to his Talents. One of the dwarven

smiths had called out that he would have an item ready to be enspelled soon. Richter only had thirty-seven TPs left. There was a wide array of Talents left to choose from, but his gaze was pulled inexorably towards the one Talent he'd had his eye on for months. It was the high cost that had always kept him away. The fifty Talent Points required were actually threatening to stymie him again. He felt like Ralphie on Christmas Eve. The object of his desire was right in front of him, but a ruddy-faced asshole had just told him he'd shoot his eye out. Fuck it, he thought. Even though he hadn't wanted to do it, he used his Specialist Talent again.

*You have used **Talent Point Conversion IV**. By expending 175,000 experience, you have now gained: **25 Talent Points**.*

All experience earned will suffer a 0.5x penalty until this XP is repaid.

*You have: **70 Talent Points** remaining.*

If you're going to fuck yourself, might as well go deep. Richter purchased enough Talent Points for two acquisitions and a few left over besides. The penalty was really going to chafe for a while, but he knew it was worth the burn as he finally bought the Talent.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Increase Number of Enchantments** for 50 Talent Points. Allows for a second enchantment to be placed on a single item. Attempting to create such an enchantment greatly increases the*

chances of the enchantment failing to take hold in whatever object you are working upon. All enchantable objects are still bound by the same rules of enchantment size and slots. You are currently Rank I in Increase Number of Enchantments. Progressing to Rank II will cost 100 Talent Points.

*You have: **20 Talent Points** remaining.*

And while he was at it, might as well look at that bucket list...

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Weak Life Aura**. This enchantment can be applied to multiple mediums: **Armor, Weapons, and Items**. You must choose which medium you wish to unlock. Unlocking further mediums will require separate purchases with Talent Points.*

Richter chose “Armor.”

You have now unlocked the (Armor) enchantment: **Life Aura**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/4000 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

*You have: **17 Talent Points** remaining.*

He clapped his hands together and said the words his smiths had come to expect, “Let’s enchant some shit!”

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He walked up to one of the smiths that was putting the finishing touches on a spiked mace. The spikes added another point of damage to the mace's base attack. It was the only weapon Schematic the village smiths knew for maces. Krom had been in his ear before about needing to acquire better Schematics for weapons and armor. When Richter had asked why the smith didn't just make a flanged mace or any other type, Krom had responded that specific guidelines needed to be followed to ensure that the gear gained certain properties. Without the specific process, the mace would just be a fancy version of the base round-ball version.

Seeing his liege lord standing nearby, the dwarf stepped back with a pleased smile on his face, "Will there be anything else, my lord?"

The dwarf's voice had a rolling brogue similar to Krom's but much less pronounced. Hearing him speak brought the cantankerous Smith to Richter's mind. He hoped the salt-and-pepper dwarf would return from his

Trial soon. Having so many of the village's skilled men and women absent as they tried to earn their Professions had greatly hindered the efficiency of the village. It had really illustrated the importance of quality help to Richter. Despite Krom being gone, he was thankful for all the smiths that were still grinding away. It was reassuring to know that his village was not wholly reliant on any one man or woman.

Richter looked at the smith awaiting his response, "This is great, Caellen." He didn't even need to use *Analyze* to know the dwarf's name. That was happening more and more. The hundreds of people that made up his village were really starting to become like family. Of course, the fact that he spent time every day in the Forge of Heavens enchanting and working on his own meager Smithing skills helped as well.

The dwarf walked off to get a drink of water and Richter examined his first enchantment victim for the day.

<p>You have found:</p> <p>High Steel Spiked Mace</p>	<p>Attack: 14-21</p> <p>Durability: 42/42</p> <p>Item Class: Common</p> <p>Quality: Exceptional</p> <p>Weight: 2.6 kg</p> <p>Traits: +10% Damage vs Spell</p>
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Despite being less skilled than Krom, the dwarf's thirty-one skill levels and the *exceptional* quality of the weapon increased its base damage by 61%. He accessed his enchantment interface and got to work. There were only seven minutes after an item was completed that Richter could enspell it without serious penalties to the final enchantment. The chaos seed sprinkled a measure of powdered crystal onto the metal.

*Do you wish to enchant **High Steel Spiked Mace**? Yes or No.*

Richter quickly chose “Yes,” and more prompts appeared

This weapon has 36 enchantment slots (base 15 from weapon quality + 15 from Journeyman rank in Enchanting + 20% for Increase Enchantment Potential).

A list of Richter's enchantments appeared again and he decided to play with his latest toy.

*The enchantment cost of **Sonic Damage, Level II** is 4. You can reach the 3rd rank of this enchantment (Base +1 Advance in Rank). What rank would you like to enchant this item to? 1, 2 or 3?*

Richter chose “3,” and another notification appeared showing how

strong the final enchantment would be.

Final Yields from maximizing this enchantment are as follows:

9-10 Earth Damage* (base 6 + 48% for Enchanting skill + 5% for Increase Enchantment Strength + 10% for Increase Weapon Enchantment)

7-8% chance to unleash the secondary enchantment, Disarm (base 6 + 25% for Increase Additional Effect Chance)

3% chance to unleash tertiary effect (base 3 + 10% for Increase Additional Effect Chance)

* +200% vs Air, +300% vs Crystalline

*The cost to maximize this enchantment is **28 Enchantment Points**.*

Do you wish to power this enchantment? Yes or No?

Everything that Richter had seen so far was basically consistent with other items he'd enspelled in the past. Now, to his delight, there was more text right after the last question.

If you wish to add an additional enchantment, it must be empowered simultaneously. Be warned this greatly increases the chances of enchantment failure. Do you wish to add a second enchantment? Yes or No?

Richter barely read the warning before choosing "Yes" again. His list of enchantments reappeared, but this time *Sonic Damage* was greyed out.

Clearly, he couldn't put the same enchantment on the same item twice, not that he'd want to do so. Not a problem for me though, Richter thought with a smile. I'm a fucking Essence Enchanter, I've got loads of enchantments to choose from!

There were eight enchantment slots left to fill. It wasn't much, but it was enough to bring a lil' more pain. He decided to use something that had a base cost of two. Not many of his enchantments offered that so the choice was obvious. He selected *Life Attack*.

*The enchantment cost of **Life Attack, Level I** is 2. You can reach the 3rd rank of this enchantment (Base +1 Advance in Rank). What rank would you like to enchant this item to? 1, 2 or 3?*

Richter chose "3" again.

Final Yields from maximizing this enchantment are as follows:

9-10 Earth Damage* (base 6 + 48% for Enchanting skill + 5% for Increase Enchantment Strength + 10% for Increase Weapon Enchantment)
7-8% chance to unleash the secondary enchantment, *Disarm* (base 6 + 25% for Increase Additional Effect Chance)
3% chance to unleash tertiary effect, *Shatter* (base 3 + 10% for Increase Additional Effect Chance)

* +200% vs Air, +300% vs Crystalline

4-5 Life Damage* (base 3 + 48% for Enchanting skill + 5% for Increase Enchantment Strength + 10% for Increase Weapon Enchantment)

* +100% vs Death

*You have elected to enchant **High Steel Spiked Mace** with **Sonic Damage, Level II, Rank III** and **Life Damage, Level I, Rank III**. Do you wish to power this enchantment? Yes or No?*

Richter chose “Yes” and reached into his Bag of Holding, knowing what was coming next.

36 Soul Stone Points are required to create this enchantment. To finalize, expend the appropriate souls.

Richter pulled out three *common* souls. Each came from capturing the spirit of a slain monster. He had stronger captured souls, but they were much harder to come by and he didn’t want to waste them. *Common* souls would be good enough for this mace. He wouldn’t even be using this many for a *common* quality weapon, but he wanted to experiment with his new dual enchantment Talent.

His *journeyman* rank in Enchanting meant that he could use two soul stones at once. Another Talent that he had purchased, *Increase Maximum Number of Soul Stones*, let him add one more. He had also bought a Talent,

Increase Soul Stone Yield, that boosted the conversion of Soul Points to Enchantment Points by +25%. Now, instead of giving just ten soul points each, every one of his *common* souls gave twelve and a half. With those bonuses, it meant that using three *common* souls would provide thirty-seven and a half Enchantment Points, more than he needed. The leftover Soul Points would be lost to the ether.

He was so excited to try his new enchantment that his fingers were tingling. Richter laid the three soul stones near the blue metal of the high steel mace and focused. Something inside of him that was unique to those with the Enchanting skill connected with the amber jewels and *pushed*. The stones responded to their master and crumbled to dust. The dust blew away in an unfelt wind, leaving no trace but the swirling ribbons of rainbow light that were now released.

The freed souls circled the mace, blending together. The radius shrunk until it was no more than a foot wide and a handbreadth above the weapon. The energy sank into the high steel as the enchantment tried to take hold. Then everything went terribly wrong.

Every time Richter had enchanted an item in the past, a pressure-like feeling built in the air, noticeable only to him. It was like gradually diving deeper and deeper, a resistance and compression that he felt from head to toe and even inside of him somehow. The larger the enchantment, the worse the

pressure would get. Gloran, another village enchanter, had explained that what he was experiencing was the item resisting the enchantment.

Every material had an innate resistance. Some metals, like iron, were extremely hard to enchant. Others, like elementum, almost welcomed magical properties. Because of this, elementum was much easier to enchant. The way Gloran had put it was that the green metal had a startlingly low enchantment resistance, also known as a high enchantment coefficient. High steel fell somewhere in the middle of the pack.

Different metals and materials also had varying capacities for the amount of enchantment energy they could hold. Trying to place too much soul stuff into iron, for instance, could have dangerous consequences. Compared to lesser metals, elementum is the almost-bottomless well to their wooden bucket. From previous experience, Richter knew that the high steel mace had more than enough capacity to hold the thirty-six points of soul stuff. That was why it was such a shock when the weapon exploded.

While every item resisted enchantment somewhat, it had always felt to Richter like the pressure increased gradually. It could become uncomfortable, even a bit painful, but to successfully enchant an item he had only ever needed to hold on. This time, the feeling struck him unawares. Not only was it stronger by an order of magnitude, but it *felt* different. Instead of pushing in one direction against a force, this time the enchantment

felt like it jumped out of his control as if it was a squirming animal. Richter had just enough time to register that odd feeling before everything went black.

When he regained consciousness, the first thing he saw were blinking red prompts.

You have taken 72 points of piercing damage!

*You are **Bleeding**! You are losing 4 Health per second!*

*You have a concussion. You are **Befuddled**!*

The next he registered, he was hearing his name as if someone were shouting down a long tunnel. “lord richter. Lord Richter... Lord Richter, can you hear me?”

The chaos seed realized that whomever was talking had actually been shouting the whole time. As his momentary deafness passed, he became aware of a ringing in his ears. His wits were thoroughly addled and he felt pain all over. Specifically, his head was throbbing and there was a sharp pain in the right side of his chest. He lay on the ground, blinking in confusion. He weakly waved off the arms of the smiths that were trying to help him up. Why were they bothering him? They had already gotten him to sit up. He was fine where he was!

Alma flew up to hover in front of him, **Master! You have to pull the*

*spike out!**

Spike? What spike? What are you talking about, Alma? You sound funny.

She sent him a burst of pure psychic frustration, **The spike in your chest, moron!**

Richter frowned in bewilderment, but looked down. Oh my god, he thought. There's a spike in my chest. Part of him said he should be more concerned about that, but for now it just seemed like an interesting fact.

Smaller pieces of metal had embedded themselves along the front of his breastplate. One large piece had punctured the armor and was sticking out of him like a nail in a board. Blood flowed down the inside of his chest piece. He looked back up at Alma with wonder in his eyes, **Alma! I have a spike in my chest!**

Gah! Gyoti! she thought with exasperation. She flew at his chest and landed hard. In his addled state, Richter's arms easily gave way and he went from half-sitting to lying flat again. Still sending him a constant stream of abuse but somehow managing to make it sound like she was speaking under her mental breath, she wrapped both of her front claws around the shard of metal. Pulling with all her might she drew out the spike that had skewered him when the weapon exploded.

“Ow!” Richter shouted, glaring at his familiar. He knew that something wasn’t quite right with the way he was thinking, but he also couldn’t figure out what it was. His familiar rolled her eyes at him and a golden aura surrounded her. A few seconds later, the healing magic closed his wound and replenished his lost HPs. It took a minute longer for him to lose the *Befuddled* debuff, but when he did, he was able to work out what had happened.

The extra difficulty of harnessing two enchantments at once had caught him unawares. Not expecting strong resistance all at once, the soul stuff had escaped his control. The results of that were unpredictable, but this time the weapon had exploded. A piece of the hilt had poleaxed him right in the temple. A spike from the mace head had shot like a bullet into his chest. The force was so great it had even punctured his sprite breastplate. More pieces of the exploded mace had peppered his front, but thankfully only the one shard had overcome his armor. If he hadn’t been wearing his full kit, the accident might very well have killed him.

The message was clear. His chosen Profession was powerful, but also potentially dangerous. As soon as Richter’s mind cleared he checked on everyone else. Thankfully, the destructive radius of the explosion had been small. He probably wouldn’t have been hurt at all if he hadn’t been standing so close.

The only other injury stemmed from one of the dwarves having been surprised by the loud bang of the explosion. It had made him drop a hot coal that had burned his hand. Apparently, the swearing had been impressive. The dwarf was from the Rock Grinder tribe in the Serrated Mountains and his people took expletives to an art form. After Alma had healed him though, he shook the pain off. The tough dwarf was already back at work.

Richter sat on a nearby stool, head throbbing, and reflected on what had happened. He was fairly sure that creating a dual enchantment was within his capabilities. The magnitude of the resistance had just been a surprise. The chaos seed was almost positive that he could successfully complete the enchantment now that he knew what to expect. Unfortunately, the fact that the mace had exploded wasn't the only problem. As soon as he thought about enchanting, a prompt appeared.

Know This! Professions are a path that can garner much power. You may cleave the very fabric of reality, brew the truth of the universe or bring wonder to the banal. If you do not honor your Profession by giving it your all, however, you will instead find a path to ruin and damnation. Heed this warning, Enchanter: talents which have been given can also be taken away.

Your Enchanting skill has been damaged by the feedback of soul stuff during your latest attempt.

*Your ability to enchant will be unavailable for the next **3 hours and 11***

*minutes. This setback has also reversed some of your progression to the next level. -4% progression to the next skill level. Your Enchanting skill has been adjusted to **Level 48, 79%**.*

Richter started grinding his teeth while he read the prompt. Progressing in a skill wasn't just a function of hard work and "elbow grease." The affinity one had for a skill came heavily into play as well. Richter's Limitless ability gave him a 100% affinity in every skill, which meant he could breeze through skill leveling compared to almost anyone else. To make it even better, the bonus of being the Master of an Air ley line gave him another ability, Fast Learner. It increased the speed that he learned skills by 30%. Basically, he was a skill-grinding machine.

Even with all his perks though, it took for-fucking-ever to progress at higher levels. He could make it through levels one through five of any skill in an hour. At level forty-eight though, that measly 4% might take him days, if not weeks, to make back! It also didn't help that he only had himself to blame. The prompt had been right. His mind had been elsewhere when he had started the enchantment.

He had been focused on his own magnificence and what other great enchantments he might one day create. Richter's mind had not been in the moment. He had not been "honoring" his craft. He had been thinking of how he could profit from it. The chaos seed promised himself that he would not

make that mistake again. Though it might take him longer, he would give his projects his all and do his best not to be distracted by the trappings of his success.

It also rankled to lose three hours of enchanting time. He told the smiths that he would return later and to get as many projects ready as they could. Richter couldn't enchant finished items without a penalty because of the seven-minute rule, but that didn't mean his people couldn't start a queue of almost-finished projects. Hopefully, when his current restriction expired he could get some more work done. He made sure to tell them to get started on as many high steel arrowheads as possible. Richter wanted to send the village hunters and some of the sprites out with *Soul Trap* arrows today.

He apologized to the dwarf whose mace he had ruined. The smith just picked up the warped and blackened nub of its handle and looked at his lord ruefully. "Not to worry, yer lordship. I can make another in about a week."

Richter winced at the time required. There was no help for it though. He nodded to the dwarf and clapped him on the shoulder before turning to leave the Forge. Another dwarf stopped him though.

"Would you like us to repair that, yer lordship?" The smith was pointing at the one-inch hole in his chest plate. He thanked the dwarf for

reminding him. The smiths helped him out of his armor. Every time he took the gear off he thought about how easy it was to get in and out of these metal suits in a game. In real life, donning armor entailed clasps, ties and irritating minutes of maneuvers. Richter could get out of his armor by himself, but it was time-consuming and much more difficult. He left his entire suit so they could take care of the minor dings he had gotten in the Dungeon as well. Completely unencumbered, wearing only his brown pants and a stiff black jerkin, he left the Forge of Heavens.

As he walked out into the sunshine, Alma trumpeted to get his attention. The side-eye she gave him translated across species and dimensions. Having gotten the same look from plenty of women back on Earth, he knew she was telling him he was still a moron and that all the ills of his life would disappear if he just listened to her. He was tempted to reply and defend himself, but didn't. Another natural law that he was sure remained true in any world was that arguing with a woman right after you'd done something stupid was like peeing on a generator. You might think you were in charge for a second or two, but you were just going to end up with a sad dick.

So instead, he weathered the barrage of running recriminations for what he judged would be a mollifying amount of time. It never paid to apologize to a woman too soon. That would just get you in trouble for either

being condescending or not taking her seriously. Every man worth his salt knew it was best to let her see you suffer for a bit. Of course, you couldn't wait too long either. Then you got in trouble for ignoring her. What you wanted to do was speak right after her tone went up an octave or two, but *before* her nostrils started flaring. That was the sweet spot.

Once he was in the zone, he started sending her thoughts of love and appreciation. Adding a little butter at the end about how he would be lost without her, he was finally able to placate the agitated dragonling. She flew down and settled upon his shoulders. Feeling her familiar weight brought a smile to his face. That moment of happiness fled, however, as he realized it was finally time to do something he had been putting off for too long.

It was time to apologize to Elora for letting her children die.

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Richter walked west through the village towards the northern meadow. The sky was a calm blue in which scattered white clouds floated. Villagers greeted him with smiles and many bowed slightly as he walked by them. A pair of guards walking in the opposite direction stood to the side and clapped their fists to their hearts until he passed. Everywhere he looked he saw signs that his people were happy, healthy and content.

He reached the bottom of the hill leading up to the meadow that held the Quickening. Before leaving for his Trial, Roswan had built two thick walls. One was at the bottom of the hill and the other was at the top. The eastern edge of both fortifications melded into the rock wall that formed one side of the trail. The western side of the trail ended in a sheer escarpment. Roswan had built the third wall to follow the western edge of the path. The two larger walls were twenty feet high and four feet thick. They were all made of the sparkling white stone called marbled quartz. Grey veins traced

through the tough material, giving it its name. Though visually appealing, it was also harder and more difficult to work than regular stone.

The guard stationed at the bottom wall saluted and stood aside. The gate was already open. Terrod had only assigned one guard to each battlement. Unless there was an attack or a monster came too close to the outer walls, the gates remained open. The guard's primary purpose was to keep anyone without clearance out of the meadow. Between the Dragon's Cauldron, the Quickening, the skath nest and the hidden cave that contained the crystal garden, there were many valuable and sensitive locations that Richter didn't want people to have unrestricted access to in the upper meadow. If he could do it all over again, he would have placed the Forge of Heavens there as well. Richter wasn't one to dwell in the past though.

He walked by the lower gate guard with a nod and started up the slope. When he was halfway there, a prompt appeared in his vision.

Congratulations! You have learned the enchantment **Soul Trap (Weapons), Level I, Rank I**

Enchantment Size: 2

Enchantment School: Life

Effect 1: *Capture Soul* – Each rank traps the soul of the struck creature on this plane for five minutes. Can capture up to *Special* level souls

Richter was surprised by the length of time the *Capture Soul* effect lasted. Even at the first rank, the effect lasted twice as long as the spell that it had come from. It was the first time he realized that even the lowest version of his enchantments could be stronger than the spells he knew. It made him stop and think. So far, he had been thinking of his Essence Specialty as a way to become a more prolific Enchanter. If the enchantments could be stronger than magic though, it might be a way to make him even more dangerous as a spellslinger!

He decided to start unlocking more spell enchantments as soon as his Talent Points allowed. Of course, he now had a deficit and couldn't use *Talent Point Conversion* again until he earned back the one hundred and seventy-five thousand XP he'd used up. One more prompt appeared.

You now have unlocked the enchantment **Soul Trap (Weapons), Level II**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/240,000 for the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

Richter was more than curious about what effect the second level of the enchantment would offer. Time was of the essence, however. Instead of letting the mana roll over, he started investing in *Life Defense*. With Alma's help he should be done with the enchantment before the time limit on his enchantment penalty expired.

You have started learning the enchantment **Life Defense, Level I**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/2400 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

Richter passed the upper wall and once again was saluted by one of his guards. Once he was at the top of the hill, he took a minute to take in the majesty around him. The cliff walls that surrounded the meadow sparkled white in the summer sun. Marbled quartz ran in veins through the normal grey rock, making the cliffs a beautiful sight to behold. The grass was cut short thanks to the mist workers that were tasked periodically with keeping the meadow manicured. Butterflies and bees flew from the many wildflowers that dotted the grassy expanse.

To the left, a well-manicured garden grew herbs ranging from *common* to *scarce* in order to fuel the potions that his people depended upon. Beyond the gardeners tending that patch of land, Richter's second Core building stood, majestic in the summer sun. It was made entirely of clear glass, an impossibly hard translucent material. It was easily distinguished from the fragile silicon of its namesake. Every ray of light that entered the walls and ceiling of the Dragon's Cauldron refracted into startling rainbows. An herb shed was attached to the Core building, also made of glass. That was where many of the village's more valuable herbs were grown, including a few *rare* plants.

On the far western side of the meadow, a lake was fed by a waterfall that fell from the mountains above. At night, the phosphorescent plants that grew along the bottom made it glow a faint green. During the day however, it was a startling arctic blue. Hidden along the banks was a pen made of high steel where Richter kept a clutch of baby skaths. The small creatures were being bred for battle.

Hidden behind the waterfall that fed the lake was a tunnel. It led back into the rock, the beginning of a large cave system. This was where Richter had planted his crystal garden. The warren had once housed a creature of true horror, a dark aberration that he had chopped into small pieces himself. Sometimes his mind went back to that battle and he couldn't suppress an

involuntary shudder. The thing had fed on the souls of the innocent for centuries, corrupting them in the process. He still had an unresolved quest to cleanse twenty black gems of that taint. The Hearth Mother had said she could help once they returned to the Hearth Tree, though she had recoiled in disgust from the tainted jewels.

Inscribed along the northern cliff face was an enchanted monument to all the villagers who had been killed since the founding of the village. Their names glowed one at a time, a constant reminder of those who had paid the ultimate price for the settlement. He remembered one name above the others, a small girl named Petal. She had been slaughtered when the bugbears had raided his village. She often came to his mind. It was a true tragedy that after the battle with the goblins, the list of names had more than doubled.

In the northeast corner of the glade was perhaps the most powerful and most important feature of the village. The Quickening was a majestic tree that rose gracefully from the ground. The silver bark was smooth, but also inscribed with whorls and symbols. Richter had often wondered if it was a celestial language. His Gift of Tongues ability was powerful, but he had learned in his first moments in The Land that it could not decipher heavenly or demonic languages. The words of “higher” or “lower” beings were beyond him.

It was this heavenly tree that was Richter’s destination. Amidst the

snow-white leaves, a celestial people made their home. The pixies had been gone from The Land for millennia, slaughtered by a magical plague. All that had remained was one queen, hidden away in a chrysalis. The rebirth of the pixies was what had made the wood sprites of the Hearth Tree Richter's allies. Elora, the pixie queen, had bonded with the Quickening. In so doing, she had evolved her race into celestials. In all the world, there had been only one hundred and one pixies, Elora and her children. Now, because of Richter's decision to attack the goblins, some had died.

When he got closer, he looked out for the two sprites that normally guarded the tree. For the first time in months they did not greet him, however. Richter was slightly surprised. Then he realized the Hearth Mother had probably recalled them. With her army camped in the village, the tree was more than protected. Also, the nearly one hundred meidon sprites that had sworn their allegiance to Richter often spent their time under the boughs of the Quickening. More than thirty were there as he walked up. They had once been wood sprites, forest sprites and hill sprites, disparate peoples who had not liked, and possibly even hated, one another. Once they bonded with their meitu'meidon pixies, they had all been reborn as meidon sprites. All were now united in purpose. They saluted as he approached.

Richter returned the respect and then, with an easy smile, told them to relax. He passed under the boughs of the tree and looked up. Pixies of four

different colors darted around under the canopy. While the tops of the Quickening's leaves were a thick velvety white, the bottoms were a shining silver to match the trunk. When they saw Alma, a great cry of delight spread among them. The dragonling immediately flared yellow as she cast *Weak Haste*. With her speed increased by 15%, she started a swooping, diving game of chase with the pixie children.

The chaos seed smiled faintly at his familiar, but kept walking towards the trunk itself. The tree was dozens of yards high and the limbs arced outward like a bell. They swayed as gently as a willow in the wind and reached almost to the ground. The central pillar of the tree was made of eight individual trunks that plaited together into an octuple helix. The center of the Quickening was hollow and gaps could be seen in the trunk. This was where he found Elora.

The queen was wearing a simple dress of white, made from the leaves of her bonded tree. Her children were between six and eight inches tall and had wings and hair that matched: either gold, pale yellow, black or blue. Elora, in turn, was one foot tall. Each of her four wings was a different color, also representing the ley lines that made up Richter's Place of Power. Her hair fell straight down, not a strand out of place. It was a pristine white and it reached down to her calves. Her face was soft and sorrowful. Her eyes were puffy. They were normally pure white, but now they were silver-streaked in

the same way a human's would have been red-rimmed if they were grieving. It was clear that she had been crying.

Despite her sorrow, she flew towards him, her wings a blur. A faint dusting of pixie dust fell behind her, disappearing a moment after it was shed. "I am happy that you have returned safely, my lord." She hovered in midair and curtsied. The pixie was a queen, but she had also sworn fealty to Richter and honored that commitment.

"Thank you," he responded softly. "I am sorry that I haven't had this discussion with you before now." He paused to collect himself before going on, "I did not know that the deaths of my meidon sprites would lead to the deaths of the pixies they had bonded to. I am sorry for your loss." Richter had debated various approaches and speeches, but as always, he settled for speaking from the heart.

"I appreciate your words, my lord. I believe there has been a misunderstanding, however. My children have not died."

Richter's eyes widened in shock. Not only did it seem he had been misinformed, but her words did not match her tone. She still spoke as a woman bereft, precisely as Richter would expect her to sound if her children had died. "I don't understand."

She took a deep breath. "Please follow me, Lord Richter." The queen

flew away from the Quickening and a bewildered Richter followed. Alma stayed relatively close so she could keep feeding mana to her master. The pixie children trailed behind her, a kaleidoscope of laughing children swooping through the air.

Lining the edge of the meadow was a string of tall evergreens. They were among the few trees Richter hadn't chopped down when he was reclaiming the village from the wilderness. They served as a great windbreak and also helped to hide the treasures the meadow contained. Elora flew at the speed of a leisurely walk, neither hurried nor hesitant.

The two Companions passed the garden. Isabella and the other gardeners looked at Richter with smiles on their faces. Most of them picked up on the somber tone in the air though. The one or two that started to hail their lord were silenced by a quick word from Isabella.

Elora continued to fly forward until she stopped in front of a tree. She hovered in midair, and turned her face towards Richter. He couldn't read her expression exactly. It was sad, but also filled with love. She turned back towards the tree and ran her hand along a knot in the wood. "Please place your hand here, Lord Richter."

Still at a loss, Richter did as she asked. To his surprise, when he touched the knot, it was warm to the touch. The wood wasn't hot, it was

more like the heat you would feel when touching an animal.

“Look closer.” Elora beckoned him to inspect the knot of wood.

It just looked like normal bark to him, but again he did as he was bid. His eyes scanned the surface of the tree, not seeing anything unusual or that would explain the warmth he felt. He was about to give up when he saw a faint irregularity in the bark. The folds were curved in the shape of a tiny face. Blinking in surprise, he used *Analyze*.

Name: Tani	Level: 2	Disposition: Trusting (Confused)
Race: Celestial Pixie (Sakeru)		
STATS		
Health: 1/40	Mana: 1/110	Stamina: 1/80
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 1	Agility: 11	Dexterity: 14
Constitution: 4	Endurance: 8	Intelligence: 11
Wisdom: 10	Charisma: 12	Luck: 9
DESCRIPTION		
This Celestial Pixie has suffered the loss of her meitu'meidon. Such a loss is like the loss of a piece of a pixie's soul. <i>Sakeru</i> pixies become mindless for a time and are capable of great evil. The pixie queen, Elora, was able to trigger her child's ability Tree Communion . This pixie has retreated inside of this grained cedar tree. The tree will offer protection, but the pixie herself is extremely vulnerable. In time this pixie may heal and emerge, but must be protected until that day comes. She might also bond completely with this evergreen to create a tree elemental. There are many possibilities of what can come from the <i>sakeru</i> and most are dangerous.		

Only time will tell.

“She’s alive in there?” Richter asked in awe. There was so much more to the pixies than he had suspected.

“Yes,” Elora answered. Her voice was fond, but also sad. She still had one hand pressed against the bark that her child slumbered beneath while she spoke. “I was able to get her and four of her brothers and sisters to bond with these trees.” She indicated four other nearby evergreens. Richter made mental notations on his Traveler’s map so he would remember which trees needed to be protected.

“I cannot say how long my Tani will slumber,” the pixie queen continued. “I cannot even know if she will ever wake. This is a safer choice than the alternative, however. That I know.” With her last statement, her tone had changed. The sorrow was still there like the bass line in a blues song, but she had become deadly serious. Richter was no longer speaking to a grieving mother, he was listening to a queen imparting a warning.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“The *sakeru* is the severing of the bond between meitu’meidons. The soul bonding of a pixie and sprite gives both of their lives meaning. They are finally complete and can begin to fulfill their one shared destiny. If a meidon

pixie dies first, her sprite is often bereft, possibly for years. They will remain themselves, however.”

“And when the meidon sprite dies?” Richter prompted. He was sure that the answer was not nearly as benign.

“The *sakeru* changes my people into something... different. We are awash with anger, sadness and loss. To make things worse, however, our racial ability, Fate’s Companion, is affected. It is that ability which allows a pixie to form the bond with their meitu’meidon. Whereas before a pixie could only bond with the sprite they were fated to join with, after their meitu’meidon’s death, the bond becomes untethered. Pixies that have suffered the *sakeru* can bind to other beings. In a perversion of the *meitu’meidon*, severed pixies can become *meitu’sakeru*.

“The *meitu’sakeru* bond is so deep that the two beings physically meld together, just as my daughter has become embedded in this grained cedar. When a severed pixie bonds to a normal, healthy tree, the chance for evil is almost nil. In time, my child might even reemerge and be able to live a normal life. If a *sakeru* pixie binds to a monster or an evil creature, however, they can greatly augment the power of such beings. The potential damage is incalculable. Even worse, the pixie’s soul can be corrupted for all eternity.”

She flew even closer to Richter, “It takes time for the melding to become permanent. If the new bonding is broken quickly, my child can still be saved. They can be removed from the body of whatever creature they are bound with. If one of my children remains in the *meitu’sakeru* long enough to recover their strength and fly again on their own, or if they fully bond with a monster, then they will be forever lost to darkness.

“In the past, such pixies would emerge with their very race changed. They became Corrupted Pixies, and wherever they flew, disease and rot would often follow. That was before my race evolved to become a celestial people, however, my lord. I fear that if a celestial pixie were to be fully corrupted, they might become something much worse than merely a Corrupted Pixie.”

The queen was agitated and the dust falling from her wings was tinted red at this point. She turned away from the tree and flew closer to Richter until she hovered just in front of his face. “You apologized for the deaths of my children. Now you know that a fate much worse than merely passing beyond this plane may await them. I do not blame you for their loss, my lord. In The Land, death is inevitable and if it were not for you, none of us would now live.” She shook her tiny head. “You also apologized for not coming to speak to me sooner. You now know that it is I who must apologize for not warning you of this danger earlier. My heart was simply

too full of sorrow.

“You have done much for me and my people, Lord Richter, but I must ask you for more. If you bear me any love, my liege, please heed my plea. Nine of my children, my very blood, were lost to the *sakeru*. Five have been placed safely in the trees we stand beneath. The other four have fled into the forest.

“Nature is balance, my lord Richter. This can be seen in every sunrise and every sunset. So too can it be seen in the symmetry of my missing children. One is of Water Magic, another of Dark, the third is of Air and the last is of Life. Will you find my children and bring them back to me if they remain pure? Even if you can only bring one back it would mean the world to me. If they have been irrevocably corrupted by the time you find them...” Her voice caught and silver tears ran down her face. She closed her eyes, unable to look at him as she said the final words, “Please do what must be done.”

Richter gazed upon the pixie with both sorrow and surprise swirling in his heart. Elora had unexpected depths. She had been a scared child when they had first met. Though only a few months had passed, she had become a mother and a queen. In The Land, it was not time that determined your character, but what you chose to do with it.

Now this small creature that had given rebirth to her entire race was strong enough to safeguard not only her people but the entire world from the dangers her children could pose. Richter could barely fathom the pain that her request must have caused, but what he did understand was enough to make his heart ache. Before he could respond, the Universe itself weighed in on her plea.

You have been offered a Quest: **Sakeru I**

You have learned that the celestial pixies are more than just nature's caretakers. If their bonded sprite, their meitu'meidon, is killed, then their ability **Fate's Companion** can be corrupted by binding to monsters or evil creatures. You have been charged by your Companion Elora, the pixie queen, to recover the four pixies that have fled the Mist Village. Will you endeavor to find these lost souls? It is your choice, but the entreaty of a celestial being is not to be ignored lightly.

Success Conditions: Find and return at least one of the lost pixies. If any are corrupted beyond hope of salvation, kill them before they can wreak havoc in The Land.

Reward: Unknown, but increases for each pixie returned to Elora.

Penalty for failure or refusal of Quest: Possible corruption of the forest. Possible emergence of abyssal creatures in your domain.

Do you accept? Yes or No?

Richter's heart began thudding powerfully in his chest as he read the last lines. An "abyssal" creature? He knew that pixies were devoted to the cultivation and preservation of nature. Elora had told him in the past that when her children were old enough to start bonding to local trees, there would be great bonuses that would come to his village. What if the opposite were true for *sakeru* pixies? What if they began to breed?

That wasn't even taking into account how much stronger they could make the monsters to which they bonded. The sprites that had bonded to the celestial pixies had evolved into a stronger race. Their attack power had more than doubled and they had grown in size by 33% on average, increasing their Strength, Constitution and Endurance. What if one of the *sakeru* pixies had bonded to his old enemy the rock giant? Richter couldn't even imagine how horrible that monster might have become. There was no doubt that he was going to accept this quest, but he needed to know something else first.

"How can I find them?"

"They will not have flown far, my lord," Elora answered. "The need to bond again is incredibly strong. They would instinctually be drawn towards beings of great power. It is possible that the magics each of my

children embody can give some clue as to the beings they are melded with. I will tell you that based on the stories my mother told me of *sakeru'meidon*, they will not be difficult to find. Simply watch for disruptions of the natural order.”

Well that’s not ominous at all, Richter thought. He sent a mental call to Futen while he considered the problem. It seemed like everything he did triggered another major cascade of events. He had done something good by growing the Quickening, which had led to the rebirth of the pixies. That had led to sprites being drawn to his village. Which had led to him meeting Liddle, the hill sprite. That, in turn, had triggered his attack of the goblin village to free their captives and remove the threat of the Bloodstone. They had succeeded, another win for “good” as far as Richter was concerned. Now he was finding out that despite winning that battle, the deaths of some of his sprite soldiers might trigger the emergence of an abyssal race into The Land. That was clearly in the “bad” column.

It was enough to make his head throb. Those fucking Aes Sedai had been right! It just didn’t make sense though. Yes, actions always had unintended consequences, but they shouldn’t always be world-shaking events. No matter what scientists said, flapping butterfly wings in Georgia did not actually cause hurricanes in China. Yet for him, it seemed that they did! It was almost like he was both drawn to pivotal moments and, by his

very nature, triggered massive change. The chaos seed thought about it for a few more moments and decided he was just being crazy.

Richter selected “Yes” on the quest thread. He and Elora walked back towards the Quickening and she told him everything else that she knew about her lost children. She had never actually encountered any *sakeru* pixies. They had been scary stories some of the other pixies had told her when she was young, before the plague had killed everyone but her and her mother. None of it was very helpful, but luckily, he had an entire village and an allied army at his disposal. Before they made it back to the silver tree, Futen floated up.

“How may I serve you, my lord?” the remnant asked in his deadpan voice.

Richter told him to find the village hunters and have them equip themselves with *Soul Trap* arrows the next morning. It occurred to him that he should designate a lead hunter so he would be able to communicate with them more effectively; he told Futen to relay that note to Randolphus. He was sure the chamberlain would already know who the best candidate was. Elora said she would fly to find Hisako and relate the story personally. Richter thanked her and asked her to also relate that the sprites could pick up empty soul stones and *Soul Trap* arrows from the Forge as well. There was no doubt in his mind that the Hearth Mother would take the matter very

seriously.

In the morning, he wanted his hunters, his meidon sprites and as many wood sprites as the Hearth Mother could spare to search for these *meidon'sakeru*. Futen began to float away and, as an afterthought, Richter told him to tell everyone to be on the lookout for a new pet he could *Tame*. Ideally, another high-level reptile, seeing as how he had received a substantial bonus when he had made one of them his pet. The remnant asked if there was anything else. If Futen had a superpower, it would be his ability to magically communicate sarcasm and disdain with absolutely no inflection at all. Richter just batted the floating orb away like a volleyball, and the remnant moved off.

When Elora looked at him now, he could see there was a bit less stress in her face, “It brings great ease to my heart to know that you will try to bring my children back to me, Lord Richter.” The deference and respect in her voice was clear. It was further accentuated by the curtsy she performed while hovering in midair.

“I will do my best. There is one other reason I have come to see you though. If you and your children will be in combat, I want you to start training.” The pixies’ Battle Form ability greatly improved their chances of survival in a fight, but from what Richter had seen so far, it was an involuntary reflex for the pixie children. He wanted to change that.

Their other offensive ability, Force Blast, also needed to be developed. Richter had seen how Sapir had fired a blast of Air energy earlier, but the pixie had seemed worn out after that. The second attack had faltered. Richter didn't know if one shot was all a pixie could manage. That might be the case if the attack was mana-dependent. If Force Blast was more like a muscle though, the more it was used, the stronger it would get. He intended to find out either way. Alma was proof that the size of a creature wasn't a reflection of its power. His little familiar was a killer through and through.

He told Elora that he wanted her to take all of her children to the large rock on the east side of the village every day. It stood fifteen feet tall, solitary in the grass. Its location inside of the village walls made it safe for training, and it was also far enough removed from any of the buildings that other villagers shouldn't be put in danger. The only thing nearby was the spot where the hunters dressed their kills, also distant from the other buildings for obvious olfactory reasons.

That rock was where Richter did his own skill grinding. He would unleash his offensive spells in quick succession until he was mana-depleted. Then he would run through his sword forms, or fire arrows at target rings he had set up, until his stamina depleted. At that point, the cycle would begin again. The mana headaches were horribly aggravating and vomiting from exhaustion wasn't fun, but after doing it for weeks he was finding his

tolerance for both mana and stamina depletion was improving. Richter intended for the pixies to push themselves in the same way.

“It will be done, my lord. Before you go, you should know that the Quickening fruit should be ready tomorrow or, if not, the next day.”

Richter’s eyes widened in interest. “There is no chance of them being ready now, is there?” One of the things he had been waiting for impatiently was for the celestial tree to bear fruit. When it had first grown, a prompt had said that the fruit was one of the things that gave celestials their great powers.

“Oh no,” Elora replied, almost affronted. Her voice indicated Richter had suggested something thoroughly indecent. “It would not be right to harvest such a wonderful fruit before it was ready. As a pixie, you can believe that I know my own bonded tree.”

“Yes, well I suppose,” Richter grumbled, a bit disappointed. He was sure she was right though.

He left her company with a bow. The pixie children had grown a bit bored chasing Alma so she was able to escape with her master. A quick check showed that he still needed more time to finish learning his latest enchantment. Richter thought about what to do, then a smile crossed his face. It was time to visit the skaths.

CHAPTER 31 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



Richter stopped by the Dragon's Cauldron on his way to the skath pen. Tabia was hard at work and she wasn't alone. He was pleased to see that some of the other villagers were helping out. He had let each of the village leaders in crafting, combat and magic assess their fellow villagers and gather whomever would be useful. Krom and Tabia got first dibs as they were both in charge of his Core buildings. Finding more smiths had been easy as many had worked in forges before leaving Law. There had only been one or two, however, who were trained in alchemy. Luckily, Tabia had found a few villagers that possessed enough affinity in Alchemy to start learning the skill. They were apparently given the dirty jobs of harvesting body parts from the beasts and monsters that were downed by the hunters every day. But hey, shit always rolled downhill. It was gravity.

Some of the lesser alchemists nodded and saluted with their hands to their chests. Tabia was entirely engrossed in an experiment though. Richter

had been around when one of those had gone “wrong” so he had no desire to distract her. Explosions were not the worst-case scenario. The stink from one accident had made him immediately start vomiting in disgust, and touching a powder residue had made orange warts appear in a most “unfortunate” location. It was always best to let the village’s Alchemist work uninterrupted.

The purpose of his visit wasn’t social anyway. He needed to retrieve a powerful ingredient. Searching the many cupboards might have taken a long time, but being master of a Core building had its perks. One of them was that he had a link to the building interface. After accessing it, it was the work of moments to find the item he was looking for.

You have found: Egg Sac of an Assengai Spider Queen	Durability: 22/27 Herb Class: Unusual Possible Uses: A spider queen can birth any type of assengai spider. As such, the hormones and enzymes in the sac are extremely nourishing. The contents of this sac may be used to create growth potions. It is also highly coveted by other monsters as it will make their own offspring grow stronger. This egg sac can also create strong web traps.
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Weight: 11.2 kg

The egg sac was a gooey, and quite frankly gross, malleable sphere about the size of a bean bag. Even though it had been sitting in a cupboard for months, the outside was still slightly sticky. He could feel baseball-sized globes inside of it. The white sac was speckled with black dots and smelled faintly of vinegar.

Richter left the Cauldron and started walking towards the lake. The sun was beaming down but there was also a nice breeze, so it wasn't unpleasant. It was almost a mile to the lake's edge so it took him several minutes. Unfortunately, the egg sac attracted a large number of flies and mosquitos. He was soon cursing under his breath because he couldn't even swat at them with his hands full. Alma, for some reason, was more than amused. He glared up at the dragonling swooping above his head but she just trilled happily in response. Luckily, something occurred to distract him.

Congratulations! You have learned the enchantment **Life Defense, Level I, Rank I**

Enchantment Size: 3

Enchantment School: Life

Effect 1: *Life Defense* – Each rank gives +1 Defense*

*+100% vs Death

Even the stinging insects couldn't take away his joy over his new enchantment. The +2 vs Death creatures might save the lives of many of his people. It also meant that he didn't need Alma near him anymore. He sent the dragonling away, telling her to hunt. Specifically, he told her to go drain some creatures. Her killing a few a day would help him pay back his XP deficit that much faster. She was nothing if not a savage hunter, so she didn't complain. In fact, she shot off into the forest like an arrow. He guessed he wasn't the only one who liked a little alone time occasionally.

He started investing his mana into learning the *Life Aura* enchantment.

You have started learning the enchantment **Life Aura, Level I**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/4000 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

Richter was only a dozen yards from the lake's edge when he heard a

soft singing. Walking closer, he saw what had initially been hidden by the embankment. Deera, one of the twins that looked after the baby skaths, was standing in the river. Both she and her brother were skilled in Animal Husbandry and the subskill, Exotic Beasts. The skaths were thriving under their care. Both of the sexually ambitious twins had... other notable attributes as well. Deera's were in full view.

The brunette was standing naked in calf-high water. She was singing about a girl dancing through flowers. Her eyes were closed and her head tilted, as she gently wrung water from her hair. Her pink nipples stood erect on her apple-shaped breasts. She was still wet from the swim she had just finished, and the breeze had raised goosebumps on her wonderfully shaped body. Her skin was flawless and her facial features were so perfectly symmetric that she looked otherworldly. This was no surprise, as both she and her brother had a Charisma of thirty-six.

Richter was so enthralled by the vision before him that he didn't see her brother, Derin, until the twin spoke. There was amusement in the man's voice, "It is quite good to see you again, my lord. And perhaps, it is good for"

"you to see us, as well," Deera finished for her brother. The same easy joy was in her voice as her twin's. The two of them were both born with an ability called Empathic Knowledge. The greater their Charisma the better

able they could intuitively understand the wants and needs of others.

Because of that, they had both invested heavily in the stat.

From his own reaction to them, and the reaction he saw in everyone else, Richter definitely saw the advantages that a high Charisma could bring. Deera had revealed to him that taking care with your appearance and making others like you could increase Charisma naturally. All information was valuable, but seeing as how the twins had spent years in “pleasure” houses making people happy in order to gain those bonus points, Richter didn’t see a way to immediately apply the knowledge to his own life.

No matter how they had gotten the points, there was no denying that both Deera and Derin were insanely attractive. Their Charisma also made them both extremely enjoyable in bed. There was this thing that Deera did with a half-eaten melon... Richter shook his head. He needed to stay on track.

The point was, their ability increased their understanding of others so much that they could even finish each other’s sentences. He had a feeling they got a perverse pleasure from seeing how it freaked people out. Of course, they could also just be weirdos. Either way, they were hot enough that it didn’t matter.

Deera had walked towards the water’s edge and extended her hand to

Richter. He put the egg sac down and wiped his hands on his pants. Then he took her hand and helped her up the few feet to the embankment he stood on. Whether by accident or design, she fell forward into him. Her body was still a bit wet. That moisture transferred to the thin tunic he was wearing and softened the material. It made it that much easier to feel her bare breasts on his chest.

She spoke in a breathy voice, “You saved me, my lord!” Her tone might have been damsel-in-distress, but her eyes showed a fierce playfulness. The kind of look that communicated hunger, but also let him know that she was fine eating or being eaten in turn.

Richter looked down at her and a feral grin came onto his face in spite himself. The egg sac had definitely made a mess of his shirt, and left a bit of a smell, but Deera didn’t seem to mind at all. That, of course, just aroused him even more. He was filthy. She liked it. That made her filthy, and he fucking loved it.

Derin’s laugh broke the spell, “Now now, sister dear. I don’t think Lord Richter came to play.”

Deera pouted and looked up at him, but her brother was right. There was work to be done before the feast that night. After though... He shook his head again. Focus man, he thought to himself. Focus! He disengaged

her arms that had somehow magically made their way around his neck and stepped back, picking up the egg sac again. She frowned at him for a second and mumbled something about how it wasn't fair that when she was almost dry he had gone and made her wet again. But then the tantalizing creature just looked down at his bulging breeches and knew that she would be seeing him again that night. With a coy smile and a flick of her hair, she turned and dove back into the lake.

Richter stared after her for another second, then hopped down into the mud along the lakeside. Only a few feet to his left was the skath pen. The entire thing was made of high steel bars and rose at least five feet off the ground at every point. Half of it extended out into the lake, allowing the skaths to swim. Every part of the fence, land or water, was tall enough that it could be embedded a further five feet into the earth. Richter doubted the enclosure would contain a full grown skath, but it was more than enough for the babies.

He realized that "baby" wasn't quite the right term anymore though. It had been almost thirty days since the skath young had hatched. The change was obvious. When first born, the skaths had moved in an awkward waddle, but now they were scampering around quickly. Some were milling around Derin's legs, who stood in the middle of the enclosure, and others were wrestling or chasing each other. They would have been completely adorable

if Richter didn't know that they would grow into deadly monsters capable of dragging off a large horse.

The chaos seed had little to fear, however. He had been present at the birth of every one of the fourteen baby skaths. Though his own Animal Husbandry skill was meager, his Dragonkin and Psi bond abilities had allowed the skaths to imprint upon him. That had formed a measurable bond between him and the baby monsters. He could actually feel the life in each of the young reptiles. Apparently, the consequences of the imprinting were far reaching, but one of the effects was that it made it much more likely for the monsters to actually be domesticated.

Though cute and young as of now, these were still wild, vicious creatures. It was only the imprint and the twins' high skill levels in Exotic Beasts that kept them from being attacked. That was the reason that Derin and Deera spent hours with the babies every day. According to them, if the skaths could achieve *Domesticated* status, then they could start being trained to be of service to the village. Others with some skill in Animal Husbandry might even be able to use them for battle like war dogs. The key was to get the pack leader, the bull skath, to be domesticated. Then the rest would follow.

As Richter got closer to the pen, all the skaths stopped what they were doing and ran up to the fence. They were as excited as ducklings following

their mama. A bit of a fucked-up thought, Richter realized, seeing as how he'd personally slaughtered their mama. Then again, he'd eaten their mama too, so in a way, she was still part of him.

“What is that you have there, my lord?” Derin asked. He looked through the bars of the fence in curiosity.

“This, my good man, is the egg sac of an assengai spider queen,” Richter replied.

“Truly?” Derin asked excited. “That would greatly accelerate the growth of the skaths!”

Richter pursed his mouth in surprise, but for only a moment. The days and nights he had spent with the twins had shown him that they were surprisingly well read. They may have been whores while they were in Law, but their high Charisma and ability had earned them a place in one of the *best* whorehouses in the city. When they weren't working, reading was allowed and even encouraged. Apparently, wealthy clients often enjoyed intelligent conversation before, after, or even sometimes during the sweatier parts of their liaisons. The twins had educated themselves on many topics, but both had devoured everything they could find regarding animals, beasts and monsters.

“That's the idea,” Richter told him. He took out his belt knife and

made a small incision in the sac. Then, massaging the outside of the fleshy white bag, he worked one of the lumps out. A new prompt appeared in his vision.

You have found: Stem Cell Egg of an Assengai Spider Queen	Durability: 2/2 Herb Class: Unusual. Possible Uses: This egg was contained inside of the egg sac of an Assengai Spider Queen. Each egg could create any type of Assengai spider or even more eggs. As the Queen is now dead, specific spiders cannot be grown, but each egg retains much of its undefined power. If fed to other monsters, it may increase their stats. If fed to immature monsters, it will greatly accelerate their growth in addition to increasing their stats. There is a very small chance of the creature evolving to a stronger form. Given proper care, this egg could grow into an assengai spider. The specific spider birthed will be random. Weight: 0.3 kg
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Well, he sure as shit wouldn't be indulging the last effect of the egg.

The first effect though meant it would be a good resource to drop down the Well of Offering. It still seemed counterintuitive that he wanted to make the Dungeon stronger, but he was done thinking he knew better than people that had grown up in The Land. Both Randolphus and Hisako were telling him to strengthen the Dungeon. Randy was a hundred years old and Hisako might be as old as dirt for all he knew. Richter had a feeling that master Life mages that were also Masters of Places of Power might age *very* well. It wasn't only black that didn't crack, after all.

It was the second effect that Richter was mainly interested in. He singled out the bull skath. When it was born it had had roughly the same dimensions as a football. Now it was "mom's gumbo pot"-size, slightly larger than all the others. Its soft skin had started to segment into scales. He bent down and beckoned it forward. The creature probably had no idea what his hand motion meant, but he had stared into the eyes of each of the skaths and made a weak mental connection when they were born. Just him willing it was enough to let the skath know what he wanted.

It mewled and swiped at the other skaths until they got out of its way. The creature cried out again. Richter could see all of its small but very sharp teeth. Wasting no more time, he handed the baseball-sized egg to it through the bars. The bull skath sniffed at it, looking unsure, then all of a sudden bit into the egg.

Richter yanked his fingers back to avoid losing a digit. The egg dropped, half in and half out of the fence. The bull skath gave a baby roar at the other monsterlings to ensure they wouldn't try to get to his meal then set to with gusto. Bite, swallow, bite, swallow. Richter watched, amazed. He didn't know how the little creature was tearing through it so quickly. In four seconds flat, the egg was gone.

Richter looked at the bull skath which was now sitting on its haunches, looking immensely satisfied. He looked at Derin and then back at the skath. "Huh," he said, "I was expecting something a bit more drama... Christ!"

The bull skath's mouth and eyes had shot open. Seven beams of emerald light were shooting from the holes in its head. One beam also shot straight out of his backside and another from beneath it, which was a bit overkill in Richter's opinion. His exclamation occurred because the skath had been looking at him when it happened. One of the beams had shot right in his eye. It didn't burn him or anything but, well, it was a beam of light in his eye!

Richter kept that eye shut but the other glued to the skath. It started shaking, not like a seizure but instead as if it was on a vibrating plate. A moment later, Richter realized it was growing! The process lasted for a full minute, then the lights winked out. What was left was a skath that could no

longer be called a baby by any stretch of the imagination. It was the size of a medium cooler. Definitely not full-grown, but well into adolescence. The diamond pattern that had been on its soft skin had turned into supple scales. They were not nearly as strong a defense as when it was fully grown, but it was a clear improvement. There were also small bone spikes sticking out of its head that Richter didn't remember seeing on the skath adults the eggs came from. The bull skath let out a roar that was decidedly not "mewl-like."

"What happened?" Deera called out excitedly, swimming back towards the shore.

Richter didn't answer because he was bombarded by prompts.

*Know This! By providing the **Stem Cell Egg of an Assengai Spider Queen** you have rapidly increased by 25% the growth of a creature that has Imprinted upon you. Current growth: **30%**. You have also increased the bull skath's attack by +2. This creature can consume another Stem Cell Egg in 7 days. Consumption beforehand will have no effect.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 3 and 4 in **Animal Husbandry**. +8% effectiveness in training. +8% stats for trained animal.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 3 and 4 in **Exotic Beasts**. +8% more likely to domesticate wild beasts. +8% stats for trained animal.*

*You have greatly aided the growth of an Imprinted animal, the **Bull Skath**.*

*This has endeared the animal to you. It has been **Domesticated!** You may take it around others without fear of it attacking villagers randomly.*

Remember that this creature will only behave as well as you control it and will only act as well as it is trained. Your bull skath may now learn specific powers including: attacks, defenses and skills. More can be learned over time.

*You have unlocked one Power for your **Bull Skath**:*

Name	Powers	Description
Juvenile Bull Skath (Lvl 1)	Chomp!	Damage of skath's bite +100% Up to 10% chance to cause weak <i>Bleeding</i> status Cost: 20 stamina Cooldown: 5 minutes

Richter was ecstatic! His dreams of an obedient monster army were one step closer. He didn't know if he was ready to let the skath just start wandering around the village though. If he was reading it right, it seemed like the twins would have a much easier time teaching the bull skath after this. Even cooler was that Domesticated monsters gained powers! That was a clear advantage over his ability to Tame creatures, at least at his current

skill rank of *novice* in Beast Bonding. Of course, Taming a creature was much faster and ensured its absolute loyalty, so he saw the benefit in both approaches to controlling monsters.

The *Chomp* power didn't seem overly cool, but he realized that was just because he was envisioning his young skath's attack. The adult bull skath he had fought months ago had been the size of a gorilla, and its bite had been tenacious, like a bulldog's. With the boost to his trained skath's stats, thanks to the twins' Animal Husbandry skill and the Exotic Beasts subskill, when his boy was all grown up one *Chomp* might be enough to kill.

Another prompt was waiting.

Know This! You have Domesticated the leader of the skath pack. There is now a +50% chance to Domesticate the remaining members of the pack.

Get the alpha and the rest will follow, Richter thought. Just like real life.

Deera was standing next to the pen now, oohing and ahing at the bull skath. Derin, on the other hand, seemed much less comfortable with being in the high steel enclosure with a juvenile monster than he had been when the bull skath was still cute. Richter told him that the bull was domesticated now though, and the twin relaxed. He still thought it prudent to leave the pen before Richter fed any more of the young skaths.

Richter opened the gate and Derin slipped out. The enlarged bull skath easily herded the others so that they didn't slip past. It was already showing its obedience and was more responsive to his mental commands. He quickly fed the rest of the skaths as well. Each underwent the same process: light and growth. They all also gained a random bonus, an increase to defense or attack in most cases, though it was just +1 rather than the +2 that the bull skath had gained. One skath even obtained a venomous bite. Ultimately, only eight of the fourteen became domesticated. Richter wasn't discouraged though. It was amazing progress for only one hour. He imagined that when he fed the skaths again in a week he would be able to domesticate a few more.

As a final plus, feeding the stem cell eggs to the skaths had catapulted his skills even further.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 5, 6, 7, ..., and 11 in **Animal Husbandry**. +22% effectiveness in training. +22% stats for trained animal.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 5, 6, 7, ..., and 11 in **Exotic Beasts**. +22% more likely to domesticate wild beasts. +22% stats for trained animal.*

*You have received 1,250 (base 2,000 \times 1.25 \times 0.5) bonus experience for reaching level 10 in the skill: **Animal Husbandry**.*

*You have received 625 (base 1,000 x 1.25 x 0.5) bonus experience for reaching level 10 in the subskill: **Exotic Beasts**.*

XP deficit remaining: -173,125

*Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in: **Animal Husbandry**. Animals that you care for now mature 20% faster. This perk is cumulative with successive ranks.*

*Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in: **Exotic Beasts**. The cooldown for the powers of trained beasts is reduced by 15%. This perk is cumulative with successive ranks.*

When he was done, he looked around the high steel enclosure. It was twenty yards in diameter and had seemed like more than enough space for the baby skaths, but now it appeared merely adequate. Richter realized that he would need come up with another solution to house his monsters. The next growth spurt might see the skaths overpowering the fence. Hopefully, Roswan would be back in time to address the problem.

Richter stepped away from the enclosure with the egg sac in his hand. It was lighter, but at a guess there were still several dozen eggs left inside. He took two more stem cell eggs out and put them in his Bag of Holding. One would go down the Well of Offering and the other was for whatever. He'd started keeping a large variety of powerful items in his Bag

of Holding. Weird shit happened every day in The Land and you never knew what might come in handy. He pinched the edges of the hole he had cut in the egg sac together just to make sure none of the gooey spheres fell out, and to his delight, the sides of the rent stuck together like moist dough. A moment later the hole had disappeared, banished by the egg sac's self-healing ability. Sometimes magic was just cool.

Both twins had already overcome their earlier hesitation. They were delighted that over half the skath clutch was domesticated now. Deera was so engrossed that she had apparently forgotten she was naked as a jaybird. The two sexy twins were already bickering good naturedly over the best way to accelerate the domesticated skaths' training. Richter watched them for another few seconds before shaking his head in amusement and thinking how strange his life was.

He left the lake, already forgotten by both Deera and Derin. The two were still on his mind as he walked though. He sang a little ditty under his breath as he thought about the party that night.

"I... love... burritos at 4 am, drunken nights that never end... and Twins! And I, love, you, too!"

CHAPTER 32 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



Richter returned to the Dragon’s Cauldron to drop the egg sac off. To his dismay, smoke was coming out from every corner of the building. The lower level alchemists were standing outside of the building and they were... orange. Like, oompah loompah orange! Cursing, in a feminine voice, could be heard from inside the Cauldron.

One of the alchemists was staring at his hands in disbelief, trying to come to terms with the fact that he was now sherbet-colored.

“I’m guessing something went wrong?”

The gnome looked at Richter with an expression which said that was the dumbest question of all time. When he saw it was the lord of the village who was asking, he stilled the sharp response that he had been about to spit out. Instead, he simply nodded and went back to looking forlornly at his own skin.

Richter told him, “Sorry, bud.” Then he handed over the egg sac and

told him to give it to Tabia for storage. The gnome's face dropped even further as he looked at the sticky mess in Richter's hand, but he took it all the same.

The chaos seed was going to clap him compassionately on the shoulder, but then decided not to. He didn't want to risk getting whatever that orange stuff was on his hand, so he just walked quickly away from the glass building. There was still work to be done.

A quick check showed that he still had more than an hour left on his Enchanting debuff. He didn't beat himself up again though. It would give him just enough time to perform a necessary task. Richter walked down the hill into the village proper. Then he made his way over to where the fallen trees and harvested marbled quartz were stored. Roswan's absence had basically halted the production of buildings in the village. On the upside, there would be plenty of raw material for the taciturn elf to work with when he returned.

Among the chiseled blocks of stone, there were many small rocks that had fallen off. These were what Richter was interested in. In addition to being incredibly strong and beautiful, the marbled quartz was an inexpensive way to make *basic* soul stones. Most plain rocks could make, at best, only *weak* soul stones, a full rank lower. If his people and the sprites were going to cull the surrounding lands and farm the Dungeon to fuel his enchantments,

he would need repositories for the captured souls.

Resigning himself to a boring hour, he started picking up rocks. Richter lined them up on top of a large chiseled block. When he had several dozen arranged, he began casting. His hand twisted into a specific configuration and he cast *Create Soul Stone (Common)*. Like the name implied, it could only make soul stones of *common* rank or lower, but it was more than enough for his purposes.

A word of Power passed over his lips. White light surrounded his fingers and he held the radiance over the first rock. The white stone turned liquid and ran as if it were melting. The color also began to change. The light went out from around his hand, but the process continued. He knew from experience that the process took several seconds. As the spell had no cooldown time, he moved onto the next rock.

Richer went down the row like that. One after another, the rocks of white stone were changed. With his recently increased mana, he made more than two dozen. He left a little bit in the ol' magic tank because full-on mana headaches felt horrible. Richter had never had a migraine, but he was pretty sure this was worse.

When his magic bottomed out it made his vision blur, his temples throb, and any attempt at concentration extremely difficult. When he only

had thirty-eight mana left in his pool, he took out his short swords and began to go through his sword forms. One after another he performed the seemingly simple but infinitely demanding series of techniques that Yoshi had taught him. *Forest Wind* flowed into *Willow in the Storm*. Richter ended low then uncoiled his body like a spring, extending into *Crane's Neck*. He followed that by spinning with both blades outward in *Samara Seed Falls*, then did a combination of *Reaping Wheat* and *The Lady's Fan Opens*, attacking and defending at once.

Richter wove from one form to the next. He didn't rush. An old wrestling coach had taught him that "slow is smooth, smooth is fast." It had sounded like some zen bullshit at the time and was especially strange coming from an ex-Navy Seal whose chin could have opened a can of tuna. Richter had soon learned that the man spoke the truth though. Much better to have control of his movements and truly learn an attack than to learn it wrong by moving too fast.

He practiced for twenty minutes and worked up a nice sweat. His mana was almost completely refilled by then so he sheathed his swords. Even after life-and-death battles, he still felt super cool slamming his blades back in their sheaths. Yeah, Richter thought with a self-deprecating smile, premium grade-A badass. He walked back over to the line of stones. The first set had long since finished transforming. Where before had rested a

series of white rocks, nearly fifty cut amber jewels now resided. The jewels were six-sided and roughly circular. Each one that Richter picked up made his hand tingle pleasantly.

He put all of the soul stones into his bag and moved on to the unchanged rocks. Richter started casting his spell again. Less than a minute later, another twenty soul stones were being converted. The chaos seed rubbed his temples again and went back to training. Another twenty minutes passed and he started the cycle again.

Ten minutes into his third set of sword forms, he felt a gaze upon him. When he saw who it was, he rolled his eyes, “What do you want, Sion?”

The sprite spread his arms innocently, “I just thought you might need help. It appeared that you were having some type of seizure, flailing your arms about like that.”

“You’re a riot, man. How do you fit so much humor into such a small, little package?” Richter rejoined with a smile. He squinted as if having a hard time seeing the sprite.

Sion opened his mouth to respond but then thought better of it, shaking his head, “Too easy.”

Richter nodded and apologized, “Yeah, that’s my bad. I really

softballed that one in.”

Sion smiled at his friend, “Now you’re just making it ridiculously easy.”

“Just like yo mama,” Richter shot back reflexively.

Sion’s face grew still, and a pregnant pause filled the air. Richter started scrabbling, “Where I come from... people say that... I didn’t really mean...”

The sprite took a step towards him, his eyes widening with menace. Then he broke into a large smile, “I’m just... fucking with you. That’s the right term, isn’t it?”

Richter smiled and exhaled in relief, “Yeah, it is.” Sion reached out a hand and the two men clasped wrists in camaraderie. The sprite tightened his grip though and yanked Richter in till they were chest-to-chest.

“Don’t ever say that again though,” Sion said with deadly intent, “or I’ll tell my mother, and she’ll bury you alive.”

Richter nodded earnestly. The threat was not an idle one. Hisako was an Earth Master and probably could literally make the ground swallow him up. “Good safety tip.”

Sion smiled broadly and let go, “Excellent. Enough talking though. I didn’t come to find you just to see your pretty face.”

“Pretty?” Richter asked with a smile.

The sprite shrugged, “Pretty ugly.”

Fuck, Richter thought. Walked into that one.

“What’s your skill in Archery now?” Sion asked, enjoying his friend’s discomfort.

“Seventeen,” Richter answered. “Why?”

“Because it’s time you learned *Stun Shot*.”

Months ago, when Richter and Sion had been in Law, the capital city of Yves, they had both been trained for a mission. One of the men they learned from was Ulinde, an *adept* archer. The elf was one of the villagers that was currently away for his Trial. He had taught both Richter and Sion subskills in Archery. *Stun Shot* had required a skill level of ten in Archery though and Richter hadn’t advanced that far at the time, so he had missed out. Since becoming an *initiate* in the skill, it had occurred to him to ask either Sion or Ulinde to teach him, but there was always more to do. Sion was right though; now was a perfect time.

“Let’s get started,” Richter exclaimed with a grin.

Learning the subskill was actually amazingly easy. The visualization wasn’t too different from how he imbued an arrow. That required he extend his mana field around a nocked arrow and simply let mana flow from the rest

of him into the shot. *Stun Shot* on the other hand, involved him extending what Sion called his “chi.”

Just as his aura was a manifestation of his magical self, chi was apparently an extension of his physical self. It was strengthened by his health but, typically, stamina was used to fuel chi-related attacks. What took the most time was for Richter to start visualizing that field. It was not too difficult, however, because he had been unknowingly using his chi whenever he fought. Even walking and breathing was a function of chi to a certain extent. It took another hour, but the trick for Richter was to start thinking of the bow and arrow as part of himself. Then he was able to imagine firing a piece of “himself” at an enemy, but with a knot of chi coalesced at the tip of the arrowhead. It had required him firing arrow after arrow at a large block of marbled quartz, but it was worth it. It was with a sense of pride that he finally earned a prompt.

*Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: **Stun Shot**. By focusing your chi, you now have a chance to stun enemies with fired arrows. The cost for using this subskill is 30 Stamina. This is a subskill of Archery.*

“Woot!” he shouted, throwing a fist in the air.

“Well done,” came a melodic voice reminiscent of a well-played woodwind.

Both Richter and Sion looked over in surprise, and saw the red-headed Hearth Mother sitting on a nearby block.

“How long have you been there, mother?” Sion asked.

“Just long enough,” she replied enigmatically.

Richter blinked. Had her eyes landed on him just a touch too long when she said that?

“I would like to congratulate you on your new skill, Lord Richter,” she said, walking forward with a smile.

“Thank you, Hearth Mother,” he replied respectfully.

“What is this, however?” she asked gesturing to the empty soul stones he had yet to put away.

“Oh, I’m just making some soul stones. We are going to need a great deal if I am going to outfit our people for the battle to come. Unfortunately, even at the speed I’m making these, I don’t think I’m moving fast enough.”

“Hmmmm,” she hmmm’d thoughtfully. Then she stood in front of the block and raised both arms. The sleeves of her robes fell back, revealing strong but somehow still delicate hands. She began a casting. White light surrounded her right fingers and green light surrounded the digits on her left. Ten seconds later, she finished the incantation by slamming both hands down on the yard-long block of marbled quartz. There was a crack like the splitting

of an iceberg and the rock broke into countless pieces. Even as they fell in a pile, flecks of amber began to appear in the tumult. The reaction happened faster and faster. Within five seconds, every single piece of the quartz had been turned into a soul stone!

Richter's mouth dropped open. Had she really just turned a ten-ton block of superhard rock into rubble? Had she actually just cast two spells simultaneously? From two different spell schools? And how many had she made? There had to be hundreds, if not thousands, of soul stones! He was blinking like an idiot, still unable to believe what he had seen. He picked up one of them and received a further shock. It was *common* rank. He checked more, and they were all that rank!

"How?" he breathed out in amazement.

"Lord Richter," she replied in a mocking and admonishing tone. "With a sprite as a Companion, you should know how capable my people are. You never know what we can do, what we have seen, or," she paused, glaring at him, "what we hear. My son should have proven just how capable he is... just like his mama."

"Ahhhh..." Richter ahhhh'd. His mind reverted to bestial guy mode, searching for whatever lie might make a woman stop being mad at him. Had she really heard him joking about her earlier? She hadn't even been around!

She smiled at him, “I look forward to the festivities tonight.” Then she cast another spell, green light surrounding her hands. A cloud of brown smoke shot from her hands and washed over Richter. A prompt appeared in his vision.

*You have been afflicted by an **Unknown Spell**.*

“What was that?” he cried out.

“Nothing permanent,” she responded with flippant mirth. The Hearth Mother turned and started walking away. “I will see you at the feast,” she called over her shoulder.

Richter looked at Sion, wild-eyed. “What was that?” he repeated. “What was that?” His first question was a bit high-pitched, but the follow-up one was positively shrill. “She was joking, right? She didn’t actually curse me or anything... right?”

“Uhhh,” Sion uhhh’d. He didn’t offer anything else as he looked at his friend. He just started chewing his lip in mild concern and wisely started edging away.

CHAPTER 33 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



Richter stood there for another full minute, flabbergasted. Sion beat a speedy retreat in case whatever his mother had done was contagious. The chaos seed checked himself over... *all* over, but everything still seemed to be in the right place. Without another option, he just went on about his day.

It took several minutes to gather up all the soul stones. Remembering the casual but awe-inspiring demonstration of Hisako's power, all he could do was shake his head. He hadn't even thought it was possible to... he didn't even know what to call it. "Double casting" he supposed. His Dual Cast skill allowed him to use both hands to augment the power of a single spell. Doing so increased the spell power of the casting, but also greatly increased the chance of spell miscasts. The amount of concentration and willpower that would be required to cast two different spells at once...

He shook his head again. He couldn't even conceive of how the incantation would work. Though casting a spell looked easy from the

outside, that was only because spell books artificially implanted complex calculations, mental stressors and exacting nuances into one's head when a spell was learned. It was a shortcut that let magi circumvent the years of study, research and experimentation required to create even a low-level spell for the first time. Having to combine that knowledge into something new would be like taking a cell phone and a tv and making an interactive hologram.

One thing was clear; he had a great deal more to learn. Actually, two things were clear. Hisako had hooked him up! Richter used his Bag of Holding like a scoop. He dragged it along, letting the soul stones disappear inside of the spatial folds. The bag had a handy function of affixing a counter next to items to say how many there were. Hisako had just made him two thousand four hundred and nineteen *common* soul stones. Even with the 90% weight reduction, it made his back ache to carry them all. Richter carried his burden to the Forge and called for a large sac.

What followed was an irritating thirty minutes. While he could scoop up items quickly, removing them had to be done by hand. The smiths soon had to bring over another burlap bag. Then another. He left about a hundred in his Bag of Holding. When he was done, Richter carried the bags over to the elementum chest near the back of the smithy. By the force of his will alone, the lid of the green chest opened. Again, there were perks to being the

master of a Core building.

Richter placed two of the sacks inside. Then he emptied about three hundred soul stones into a nearby bucket. He put the last half-filled bag in the chest. When he closed the lid, it merged seamlessly back into the bottom half. To anyone without access, it would just be a block of powerful, self-healing metal. He had almost no concern of a thief breaking into it. Richter couldn't even conceive of something that was strong enough to destroy a Core building.

Richter called Bowdin over, the dwarf who was in charge of the smithy during Krom's absence. He told him to let hunters and sprites take a few soul stones at a time, but only with the understanding that they would need to be returned filled. The chaos seed also made it clear that the old policy for harvesting souls was no longer in play.

Before, he had given bonuses to any hunters who not only brought meat back to the village but also captured souls. That was mostly to encourage the few who had Life magic to take the extra effort and risk of casting *Soul Trap* before making a kill. With his *Soul Trap* enchanted arrows, that was no longer necessary. Also, he just didn't feel like he had to beg for people to pitch in anymore. He'd been uncomfortable in his position as a leader at first, and had felt awkward about giving orders. After leading his people through a war, he no longer had those reservations. He was the

lord of the Mist Village. It was time he started acting like it. The dwarf did not blink an eye at Richter's authoritative tone. He simply nodded to his liege. Everyone in the Forge of Heavens looked at the chaos seed expectantly, waiting to see if their leader had more to say.

Richter clapped his hands, "Let's get back to work."

As per his instructions, a handful of the smiths had prepared arrowheads. Over the next ten minutes, he made one hundred *Soul Trap* arrows. It only required ten *weak* souls. He could enchant ten arrowheads for the same amount of Enchantment Points that it took to enchant one larger weapon or piece of armor. Enspelling the arrows didn't even earn him 1% progression to his next skill level in Enchanting, but he did progress in his new enchantment.

*Congratulations! You have unlocked **Rank 2** of the enchantment: **Soul Trap**.*

Richter enchanted several more arrowheads and then walked over to a smith finishing a leather cuirass. Taking a *basic* soul from his bag, he enchanted it with *Life Defense*. The magic took hold, and the description of the item changed.

You have enchanted: Leather Cuirass	Defense: +10 Durability: 26/26 Item Class: Uncommon
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of Life Defense	Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 2.4 kg Traits: +1 Life Defense* +2% Resistance to Air creatures, magic and attacks <small>*+100% Defense vs Death</small>
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The second trait came from one of the Forge of Heavens' inherent abilities. Each weapon forged was given a +10% bonus to attack vs spell barriers. Each piece of armor created gained 2% resistance to a random spell school. The smith stored the armor and started on a new one.

They kept enchanting. Richter was able to enchant several daggers with *Life Attack*, a few shields with *Life Defense* and several dozen more *Soul Trap* arrows. None of the items were of high enough quality for him to try placing two enchantments upon until he came to Bowdin's work.

"I have been working very hard on this here sword, yer lordship," the dwarf said in an almost pleading voice. "I used me Dense Forging subskill and just added the last ingot." He paused, not wanting to offend his lord, but still added, "It would be a shame if it were to explode... for any reason."

Richter rolled his eyes. Apparently being lord of the village was

enough to keep Bowdin from saying, “Don’t fuck up again, ya donger!” but wasn’t quite enough to keep the dwarf from implying that “something” bad could happen to his sword now that Richter was involved.

“It will be fine,” the chaos seed assured him. “I know what went wrong last time. I’m positive I can handle it.” Bowdin nodded, looking a bit relieved. Richter just couldn’t resist adding, “I mean... almost positive.” A faint look of horror appeared on the smith’s face, but Richter had already started.

You have found:	Attack: 23-31
Dense Moonstone	Durability: 104/104
Longsword Blade	Item Class: Uncommon
	Quality: Superb
	Weight: 5.2 kg
	Traits: +10% Damage vs Spell Barriers

Richter could see why Bowdin was so touchy about this blade. The dwarf was only an *apprentice* in Smithing. That meant he pretty much had a 99% chance to make arms and armor that were either *above average*, *well crafted*, *exceptional* or *superb*. The probability of each quality occurring

followed a bell curve that skewed right as a person became more skilled. At the lower end of Bowdin's *apprentice* rank, it had been more likely he'd make an *above average* or *well crafted* quality weapon. Now that he was just one skill level shy of being a *journeyman* it was much easier for him to produce higher quality arms, but he still had to work diligently to produce a *superb* weapon.

The weapon was even more valuable because Bowdin had used his Dense Forging subskill. Once a blade was nearly finished, he could add extra ingots of metal to increase its damage and durability. The downside was that each ingot also increased the weight and the base requirements of the weapon. Every time the smith added another amount of metal to what he was forging, it required more Strength, Agility, Dexterity or whatever else the base requirement of a weapon or piece of armor was to wield or wear. Thankfully for Richter, his stats were respectable across the board.

Despite the dwarf's concern, it worked out well for Richter. The higher quality meant that this blade would have a greater enchanting potential. It also meant that he would be using more soul stuff, which increased the chance of the enchantment failing. Go big or go home, he thought. Taking a deep breath, he began. Reaching into his bag, he withdrew a small pouch. Inside was a sparkling crystal powder. It was white, but when it caught the light in certain way, it turned a deep blue.

Richter took a handful out and sprinkled it along the length of the weapon.

*Do you wish to enchant **Dense Moonstone Longsword Blade**? Yes or No?*

Wasting no time, he chose “Yes.” He couldn’t afford hesitation or distraction.

This weapon has 42 enchantment slots (base 20 from weapon quality + 15 from Journeyman rank in Enchanting + 20% for Increase Enchantment Potential).

A list of Richter’s enchantments appeared in his vision. He made the same choice as before.

*The enchantment cost of **Sonic Damage, Level II** is 4. You can reach the 3rd rank of this enchantment (Base +1 Advance in Rank). What rank would you like to enchant this item to? 1, 2 or 3?*

Richter chose “3,” for the second time that day.

Final Yields from maximizing this enchantment are as follows:

9-10 Earth Damage* (base 6 + 48% for Enchanting skill + 5% for Increase Enchantment Strength + 10% for Increase Weapon Enchantment)
7-8% chance to unleash the secondary enchantment, *Disarm* (base 6 + 25% for Increase Additional Effect Chance)
3% chance to unleash tertiary effect, *Shatter* (base 3 + 10% for Increase

Additional Effect Chance)

* +200% vs Air, +300% vs Crystalline

*The cost to maximize this enchantment is **28 Enchantment Points**.*

Do you wish to power this enchantment? Yes or No?

As he got closer to finishing the enchantment, Richter was starting to feel nervous. He gritted his teeth though, and yelled at the worried part of himself. There was no time for doubt. He went on to the next prompt.

If you wish to add an additional enchantment it must be empowered simultaneously. Be warned this greatly increases the chances of enchantment failure. Do you wish to add a second enchantment? Yes or No?

Richter chose “Yes.” Then his list of enchantments appeared again. He had fourteen enchantment slots to fill this time thanks to the *superb* quality of the white blade. If he chose *Life Attack* again there would be six enchantment slots left unfilled, even if he enchanted up to the third rank. He had thought about that before he started. Instead of *Life Attack*, this time he chose *Freeze*. He still would only be able to enchant up to the third rank, but the enchantment didn’t just do damage, it also gave the possibility of freezing enemies solid for a short time. Besides, Richter wanted to test himself with as much soul stuff as possible. He hated hesitant people, and he despised

self-doubt. The chaos seed was about to make this enchantment call him daddy!

*The enchantment cost of **Freeze, Level I** is 3. You can reach the 7th rank of this enchantment (Base +1 Advance in Rank), but there is only room in your item to reach the 3rd rank. What rank would you like to enchant this item to? 1, 2 or 3?*

Richter chose “3.”

Final Yields from maximizing this enchantment are as follows:

9-10 Earth Damage* (base 6 + 48% for Enchanting skill + 5% for Increase Enchantment Strength + 10% for Increase Weapon Enchantment)
7-8% chance to unleash the secondary enchantment, *Disarm* (base 6 + 25% for Increase Additional Effect Chance)
3% chance to unleash tertiary effect, *Shatter* (base 3 + 10% for Increase Additional Effect Chance)

* +200% vs Air, +300% vs Crystalline

4-5 Water Damage* (base 3 + 48% for Enchanting skill + 5% for Increase Enchantment Strength + 10% for Increase Weapon Enchantment)
4% chance to unleash the secondary enchantment, *Freeze* (base 3 + 25% for Increase Additional Effect Chance)

* +100% vs Fire

*You have elected to enchant **Dense Moonstone Longsword Blade** with **Sonic Damage, Level II, Rank III** and **Freeze, Level I, Rank III**. Do you wish to power this enchantment? Yes or No?*

Mentally bracing himself, Richter chose “Yes.”

***40 Soul Stone Points** are required to create this enchantment. To finalize, expend the appropriate souls.*

He withdrew three soul stones from his Bag of Holding. One of them held a *basic* soul, but to fuel this enchantment, he needed a stronger soul as well. A *luminous* and a *common* soul stone came to lay next to the smaller gem. *Luminous* souls only came from stronger monsters like an adult bull skath. They were basically mini-bosses, and as such were much harder to come by. The stakes of successfully ensPELLing the blade rose even higher.

Richter accessed the soul stuff in the gems and *pushed*. The amber gems crumbled into dust and the rainbow souls were released. They swirled around the blade, getting closer and closer until they sunk in. Everyone else in the smithy was watching but from at least a dozen yards away. The smartest were peeking out from behind large objects. Richter didn’t notice. He was holding a tempest at bay.

The enchantment resistance hit him with a jolt. It wasn't overly strong. More like a friend trying to slap a sandwich out of your hand. If you weren't paying attention, your lunch would be gone and then retaliatory violence would have to ensue. If you were smart enough to understand that all true friends were assholes though, it was relatively easy to hold on to your food.

The pressure increased. In a few seconds, it felt like Richter was holding the leash of a large dog straining to chase after a squirrel. Seconds after that, it increased to the strength of three people trying to push open a door that he was straining to keep closed. It wasn't just the worsening pressure that made it difficult, it was the fact that he had to respond to the "changes in direction." In the past, he had just needed to endure an increasing force that felt like it came from a single direction. Now, he was actively working to keep the soul stuff centered on the blade. The two enchantments battered against each other one moment and fled in opposite directions the next.

Richter didn't know it, but his hair had begun to stand up on end. Wisps of black curls rose into the air. A feeling of static filled the entire forge. The chaos seed's face took on a stark aspect as he struggled to contain his enchantment. Ever so slowly, his lips peeled back in a snarl and his hands partially curled over the sword like he was pushing down on an invisible

dome.

The rainbow light spun faster and faster. Richter's hair flew around his face, buffeted by gale-force winds from another reality, a storm that only he could feel. Still he barely noticed, his entire focus and will centered on the enchantment before him. It strained to be free, but he would not allow it. He was lord. He was Enchanter. He was Richter!

It was done!

Richter almost fell forward after the enchantment resistance suddenly vanished. The staticky feeling in the forge disappeared, and he came back to himself. The chaos seed's heart thudded inside of his chest. He felt exhausted, but also triumphant.

“Yar! Ay told ye he could do it!”

That dwarven cry shattered the silence of the forge. Richter hadn't realized just how quiet it was, but he quickly looked around. Every other single person had fled the Forge. Richter realized he couldn't tell if a minute or an hour had passed. Based on the sunlight coming in from outside, it couldn't have been too long. He looked at his people, amused as they meandered back in. His efforts had actually gathered quite a crowd of passersby.

Richter was flattered... until he saw money changing hands. Some

wagering had apparently taken place. That was fine, but it also meant that a good number of those bastards had bet against him! While he listened to one of the dwarves complain, he discovered it got worse. They'd put odds on his efforts, three-to-one against!

“Everybody knows,” he raised his voice in mock anger and waved one finger at all of them, “that you always bet on black!”

They, of course, had no earthly idea what he was talking about. Just seeing their confused faces was enough for him. With a smile, he looked at his new prompt and saw what he had wrought. It was good!

You have enchanted:	Attack: 23-31
Dense Moonstone	Durability: 85/85
Longsword Blade of	Item Class: Unusual
Shattering Ice	Quality: Superb
	Weight: 5.2 kg
	Traits:
	+10% Damage vs Spell Barriers
	+9-10 Earth Damage*
	7-8% chance to <i>Disarm</i>
	3% chance to <i>Shatter</i>

	<p>+4-5 Water Damage **</p> <p>4% Chance to <i>Freeze</i></p> <p>Charges: 468/468</p> <p>* +200% v Air, +300% v Crystalline</p> <p>** +100% v Fire</p>
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Before Richter could shout a “Hell yeah,” before he could even give a baby “woot,” a light appeared above him. The ceiling of the Forge of Heavens was no simple roof. It was an exact image of the heavens above. Day or night, stars, moons and even the occasional comet could be seen in the ceiling. The picture changed as The Land spun through the cosmos.

Depending on the heavenly bodies above, and other factors that Richter had no idea how to predict, sometimes one of the Forge’s abilities activated. That was why he was so excited about the village’s current research. Soon they would know much more about how his Core building worked. It was a branch of research unique to the village. Even without it, sometimes they got lucky though. This was one of those times!

Four stars that formed a perfect square lit up. Spirals of black light descended from the ceiling. The process was slow, and it took more than a minute for the ebony tendrils to reach the blade. When they finally touched the moonstone though, something miraculous happened. The white of the

blade began to leach away. It was like the black tendrils were straws that were sucking up the color.

The white moved faster and faster up the black spirals until they touched the ceiling. Then the four stars flared again. The now white corkscrews unraveled like a rope made of countless strands. Each strand then unraveled. The process repeated again and again until they disappeared from sight.

Richter had been distracted by the process like everyone else. Once it was done, he quickly looked back down at the blade. To his surprise, it was now completely black! Not only that, but the sword looked thinner and sleeker than before. Even though it hadn't been sharpened yet, it almost looked like it had developed an edge. Before he could access the prompt of the blade, Bowdin leaned over the blade with eyes as large as saucers.

“Darkstone!” The smith's voice was intense, but he whispered the word in reverence.

The word was taken up by every other smith and they shouldered the other villagers out of the way. More than a few reached out to touch the blade, but then stopped, as if they had almost committed sacrilege. Richter thought about it for a moment. In a world without gods, special metals just might be holy to those with the Smithing skill. The chaos seed still didn't

know exactly why a color change would elicit such emotion though.

Dwarves were boisterous when angry, loud when drinking and, according to Krom, titans in bed. “A man’s true height only be judged lying down, yer lordship!” If Richter had to hear his smith say that one more goddamn time... He shook his head free of the irritating remembrance. The point was, the chaos seed had only seen the dwarves reverent once before, and that was when the Forge of Heavens had been created.

“Darkstone?” Richter asked, hoping someone would clue him in.

Bowdin didn’t even look at his liege when he answered. His eyes stayed glued to the black metal. In his distraction, the dwarf’s brogue came through a bit more than normal, “It be a higher level of moonstone. Much harder, me lord. Much tougher. Ye normally only find it buried in the deepest and largest moonstone veins. Even then, ye will only find a wee bit.”

“It’s rarer than moonstone?” Richter asked, suddenly interested. Call him what you want, but he was always on the lookout for new commerce and a good deal.

His question finally pulled Bowdin’s eyes away from the black sword, “Do ye truly not know? The metal in this here blade would be enough for tribes to war over! In the mountains, only royal smiths or master smiths could even touch the stuff. Anything else would be against the law. This be

a level two metal, yer lordship. Darkstone be a hundred times, a *thousand* times, rarer than moonstone. And this be smelted into a strong blade. The knack of working level two metal be closely guarded. Some say glass actually be a level two metal, which accounts for why it be harder than a diamond cock in winter. Even if we had ingots of pure darkstone we could na forge it without knowing the secret of its smithing. Not even with all the abilities of the Forge of Heavens could I have made such a blade. This be a miracle! Ay never thought I would actually see a darkstone weapon, and yet, I even had a hand in creating it. Once again you have shown me a wonder, Lord Richter. Ye truly are amazing, my lord.”

The look in his eyes was almost adoring, and the chaos seed could see it mirrored in the faces of almost every other smith. A prompt appeared in Richter’s vision.

*Your enchanting has led to the transformation of a moonstone blade into its level two form, **Darkstone**. This, in addition to your creation of a Magic Forge, has greatly endeared you to the smiths of your village. Their Loyalty, Morale and relationship with you have all increased.*

Loyalty of smiths of the Mist Village increased by +50.

Morale of smiths of the Mist Village increased by +100.

You have gained +5000 Relationship Points with every smith of your village.

Richter also received a cascade of prompts giving him the specific improvements in relationship with over twenty of his villagers, all with the Smithing skill. Bowdin's relationship specifically became *loyal*. Once again, Richter was awed by the real world effects of the prompts he received when, one after another, the smiths went down on one knee. Human and dwarf alike began to swear their fealty to him. It even began a cascade of a few other villagers that had apparently been on the fence about accepting him as their liege lord, and soon there were nearly fifty villagers making the oath.

Richter knew that his people were generally happy. They were even *elated* based on the overall Morale of the village. That didn't mean they had all sworn fealty, however. In theory, everyone that had come to the settlement was his employee. While he didn't like thinking about it, at the end of their one-year contract, they were all free to go. It was a potentially huge security risk, but Richter had already decided that he wouldn't keep anyone against their will after they had fulfilled their obligation. Those that chose to swear fealty were different.

Doing so meant that they had accepted him not only as the lord of the village, but also as their liege lord. They swore to follow his commands and to do their best to serve him. Most importantly, it was a lifelong pledge.

Bowdin spoke first. The others followed after him in perfect sync a half-moment later, "I formally swear allegiance and loyalty to you, my Lord

Richter. From now, unto my very death, I will protect you and your interests, to the best of my ability and without deceit.”

Once again there was a moment of stillness in the smithy. The phrases they had spoken might not have been a spell, but it was clear that they were magic in some way shape or form. Every time someone swore fealty, they used almost exactly the same words. It was almost as if something were speaking through them, or perhaps they were harnessing an ancient power that demanded a specific ritual. Richter was reminded again and again that in The Land words had power. Swearing fealty created an actual bond between himself and the people kneeling before him.

He responded with his own ritual words, “I accept your oath of fealty, and swear to honor your pledge with the same gravity in which it was given.”

His people looked at him with happiness and love. The only sour note was one smith standing in the background with a disgruntled look on his face. Richter recognized him as Ardrim, a dwarven smith of the Bone Crusher clan. He had challenged Krom’s supremacy in the Forge several months before. It hadn’t come to anything, but Richter had kept his eye on the man ever since.

A resounding cheer rang out as his new vassals celebrated each other and clapped one another on the back. Richter found himself smiling, caught

up in the festivity of it all, and thoughts of Ardrim fled. He looked around and called out, “Terrod. Is Terrod here?”

The captain answered from behind the crowd, “I am, my lord.”

Richter had had a feeling that a collection of villagers would draw his Companion’s interest. With a broad smile on his face, he said, “Come up here, man. Make room! Let our Captain of the Guard come through!”

The crowd started parting and Terrod made his way into the forge. There were dozens of people in the smithy at that point. Richter had a small laugh as he thought about how Krom would be cursing up a storm if he were here. The chaos seed was the lord of the village, but after him, Krom had near-absolute power in the Forge of Heavens. The salt-and-pepper dwarf was known to get a bit violent with anyone he saw as an interloper in his personal kingdom. The rest of the villagers were enjoying the newfound freedom the dwarf’s absence afforded.

While Terrod walked closer, Richter examined the updated stats for the sword.

You have found: Dense Darkstone	Attack: 29-36 Durability: 176/176 Item Class: Scarce Quality: Superb
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Longsword of Shattering Ice	Weight: 6.9 kg Traits: +10% Damage vs Spell Barriers +9-10 Earth Damage* 7-8% chance to <i>Disarm</i> 3% chance to <i>Shatter</i> +4-5 Water Damage** 4% Chance to <i>Freeze</i> Wounds inflicted with Darkstone will fester and interfere with mana regeneration Charges: 468/468 <small>*+200% vs Air, +300% vs Crystalline</small> <small>**+100% vs Fire</small>
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He couldn't deny that the weapon was more impressive than before. The attack had gone up nearly 25%. The durability had also gotten a serious hike. The weight had gone up as well, but that was a small price to pay. There weren't any new enchantments, but it seemed that a quality inherent in darkstone was that it interfered with mana regeneration. If an accomplished melee fighter ever closed with a mage it should generally be game over

anyway, but this metal would assure it.

Richter had always thought that the special ability of the Forge meant another enchantment might be added. The fact that it could change the very metal itself opened up a whole world of possibilities. Just what else could the Forge do?

Terrod walked closer to him and Richter threw an arm around his shoulders before addressing the crowd, “You all know our Captain?” There were a chorus of cheers and his Companion raised an arm in acknowledgement. “This man,” Richter began again, “this man has laid his life on the line again and again for you, for me, for all of us!” More cheers rang out and Terrod began to get embarrassed. “He has suffered and fought, not for reward, but because he is a good man. He is someone who we can trust. Do you trust him?” The shouts of agreement were almost deafening that time. “Doesn’t such a man deserve a weapon to fit his bravery?” Richter shouted out.

“YES! Cheers for Captain Terrod! Cheers for Lord Richter! Cheers for the Mist Village!” was the resounding response.

Terrod was looking at the black blade and shaking his head, but Richter wouldn’t hear anything about it. The enchanted blade was apparently worth more than its weight in gold, but his friend and Companion was worth

ten of them as far as he was concerned. The man deserved a better weapon, and Richter decided he would glue it to his hand if need be!

The crowd continued to cheer, moved by their lord's generosity and his obvious affection for his captain. If a noble could care about one commoner, then he might care about them as well. That was a miracle even greater than seeing the darkstone for most of them. Richter hadn't planned for his gift to have such a positive PR effect, but he certainly planned to capitalize on it now that it was happening. He grabbed Terrod's hand, and raised their clasped grip above their heads in a victory salute. They faced the crowd together and the cheering grew even louder somehow. Richter was grinning ear to ear. No matter what came in the future, nothing could ever steal the wonder of this one perfect moment.

He looked over at Terrod and saw the uneasiness was still on the man's face. Richter laughed at his friend's humbleness, "Dude! Stop fighting it, you deserve this!"

"It is not that," the captain stated with chagrin.

"Then what, man?"

Terrod looked at the wildly cheering crowd then looked back at Richter before whispering, "It is too heavy. I do not meet the requirements for the sword and will not for at least another level."

Richter's smile grew strained. If the crowd found out it would ruin the whole mood, and he would not have anything spoiling his party that night. Daddy needed to relax! He thought for a moment, and then just whispered back out of the side of his mouth, "Don't let anyone else know. Keep playing along. I'll make you another one."

The chaos seed broadened his grin and raised their clasped hands as if they were running for office. The crowd's enthusiasm soared one more time. Under his breath though, he quietly expressed his true emotions, "Mother-fucker!"

CHAPTER 34 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



Once the tumult died down, Richter examined the blade again. Requirements usually never showed up in his item prompts unless there was something he didn't meet. With his relatively high level, that didn't happen overly often. It only took a mental tweak before the darkstone's requirements appeared though.

Requirements: 33 Strength, 23 Dexterity

No wonder the captain couldn't wield it. Bowdin adding those other ingots and the sword's transformation into darkstone had turned the blade into a seriously heavy sumbitch! Richter's stats were barely up to the task. Still, it was an amazingly powerful blade, and the enchantments were top-notch! Richter decided it was time for him to start using a longsword again.

His own melee style focused on dual wielding blades. Until recently, that had precluded him from using a long blade in either hand before because of a serious penalty to accuracy. He had even fallen over walking once when

he'd tried to use anything other than two *small* weapons at once. Now that he had ranked up from *novice* to *initiate* in Dual Wielding, he could use a *normal* sized weapon in one of his hands. He thought back to the fight with the tuskers in the dungeon and that cemented the idea. A bit more reach in battle would definitely be a good thing. He also couldn't deny the excitement he was feeling. Richter couldn't wait to absolutely *wreck* some fools with this new blade!

He handed it back to Bowdin so the dwarf could affix the blade to a hilt as soon as possible. The dwarf nodded and carried it back to the heavy elementum chest. When he opened the lid though, something caught his eye and his face adopted a speculative expression. Richter noticed none of this.

He waved everyone away and dealt with the remaining notifications awaiting his inspection. Richter had assumed the prompts were about the changes in relationship, but the last one was a quest!

You have unlocked a Profession Quest: **The Power of Two I**

Success Conditions: You have progressed along the path of the Enchanter. Make a total of 10 dual enchantments to complete this quest.
Current Progress 1/10.

Reward: 5 Talent Points

Do you accept? *Yes* or *No*?

The Universe really seemed to be softballing in the quest names now, Richter thought sourly. “The Power of Two One?” That was pure garbage, in his humble opinion. Like a girl talking to her third choice at last call though, he just sighed and said, “Yes.” Ugly or not, Profession quests put out cold, hard Talent Points, and he could always use more of those.

He checked over the rest of his stats quickly and saw that at long last he had made some progress to his next skill level in Enchanting. It was only two percentage points, but it was something. If Richter had known that dual enchantments were a way to power level his primary skill, then he would have bought the *Increase Number of Enchantments* Talent long before. It just proved how many secrets and wonders there were still left to discover in The Land.

The crowd dispersed and Richter kept enchanting for another hour. He was able to make many more *Soul Trap* arrowheads and he created several with *Life Attack* as well. There was even time to enchant a few more pieces of armor with *Life Defense* and *Defense +2*. Richter thought about trying another dual enchantment, but something made him want to wait. That was enough for him. He had always trusted his gut. He just hoped this time it didn’t have crap for brains.

Once he was done enchanting, he sat down and took a breather.

Richter had accomplished a great deal today, but he had burned through a large amount of captured souls as well. It made him think about how many creatures would have to die to fuel his enchantments. Was what he was doing really any different than what the humans on Earth had been doing for centuries? Denuding forests, exploding mountains and ruining nature, all to fuel their ambitions?

Richter shook his head. The answer to those questions didn't matter if he wasn't willing to stop. The truth was, he wasn't. The industrial revolution had needed coal. The genetic revolution had preyed on the poor from third world countries. Richter's own Enchantment revolution needed captured souls. He would harvest every soul in the forest if that was what it took to keep his people safe. No matter what, his village would survive.

His introspective thoughts were interrupted by Bowdin asking some technical questions about what the Forge should focus on the next day. The two men talked and came up with a game plan. By the time they were done, Richter's mood had lifted somewhat. This was The Land. He would survive. He would prosper. He would grow in power. The lives of a few hundred monsters were a small price to pay to save the lives of his people.

Another thought occurred to him that brought a smile to his face. He didn't have time to be melancholy. It was time to party!

Richter decided to get cleaned up before the feast. Based on some of the things he had in mind, it was just polite. It was also never a bad idea to *not* smell like a gross gym bag when spending time with people, especially before dancing.

He was also still cognizant of the first impression he had given the freed prisoners. True, he had helped them escape the cruel yoke of captivity, but he had been covered in gore and blood when it happened. That had been because he'd been killing their goblin captors, but they might not know that. You could not apply a rational argument to an emotional issue. Richter supposed many of them might even be worried that their "savior" was just as bad as the goblins that had enslaved them. Tonight wasn't just about celebrating life or having a good time. It was showing the freed prisoners that this was a place they could call home.

He needed more able bodies.

Richter stopped by the area where the villagers that took care of the wash sorted the clothes. To the amusement of his people, he stripped down to his smallclothes. Then with a shrug, he took those off as well and threw them in the dirty pile. After that he ran away to whoops and cheers. He called out over his shoulder, "Don't act like you're not impressed!"

He breezed through the gate, throwing up a hand in greeting. The

guards threw salutes to their lord in confusion.

“Should we go after him?” one asked.

“I don’t want the sergeant chewing me out for leaving our post,” another answered.

A third guard chimed in, “The captain might be upset if we don’t guard him though.”

It was silent for a moment. The first guard spoke up, “You know, I don’t think Lord Richter was waving. I think he was telling us to stay put.”

They all looked at the woman in charge of the guard rotation. She thought about it for a moment then nodded, “Works for me.”

They resumed their vigil.

Richter noticed none of this. He ran through the cultivated fields outside of the village. The farmers looked up from their toils to see their naked lord running by. He already had a reputation for being slightly off, dancing to the beat of his own drum... being weird, so they just shook their heads and went on with putting up their tools. Randolphus had made it clear that all were to enjoy themselves that night, so the workday was cut short.

The chaos seed decided to put a little more juice into his run and tried to cast *Weak Haste*. The spell fizzled twice before it took hold. Casting on the run wasn’t the easiest thing, and in all honesty, Richter wasn’t focusing

too well. The thought of swimming in the river was awesome. Plus, he could try out one of his new spells.

When Richter got to the riverbank a few minutes later, he scrambled to the top of a large rock. Dropping his Bag of Holding and weapons behind him, he used the stone like a springboard. The chaos seed jumped as high and as far as he could out into the river. With his high Strength, Agility and Dexterity, he got some major air! He turned as he jumped to face the village. When he reached his peak, he hung in the air for a golden moment.

The sun was coming through the trees and the air was warm. His settlement was growing, hundreds of people were living, laughing and loving. The wall was almost complete, and it made him feel good to know his villagers were protected behind it. In that golden moment, all was right in The Land. With a *whoop*, he fell into the cool river and the water flowed over his head.

He just existed under the water for a while. The hunters and fishermen scanned the river every day for predators so he felt relatively safe. He still looked around quickly right after he was submerged. The battle with the river skaths had shown him that seemingly still waters could be dangerous. Thankfully, no aquatic predators had come close to the village before, and there were none present now. Rising to the surface, Richter enjoyed his swim.

Two times while he relaxed, prompts appeared in his vision. Alma, his cuddly little killer, had been draining creatures over the past few hours. None were high level, but it was adding up. Richter was in no way complaining. He would much rather that she picked off easy prey rather than taking on a high-level opponent. She was amazingly powerful, but when she committed to *Brain Drain* she was basically helpless.

*You have been awarded **880** experience (base 20,116 x 0.07 x 1.25 x 0.5) from Brain Drain against Level 6 Tufted Varmint.*

*XP deficit remaining: **-171,392***

*You have been awarded **589** experience (base 13,472 x 0.07 x 1.25 x 0.5) from Brain Drain against Level 5 Red Tribble.*

*XP deficit remaining: **-170,803***

It had been a hard lesson, but he realized that he couldn't protect everyone all the time. The truth was, his familiar was dangerous and wild. He was just happy she was on his side, and he couldn't argue with the results. She had already gained him three thousand experience points. The last prompt made his heart race though. He knew there were many horrors in The Land, but he had never imagined... Richter made himself calm his thudding heart. He was sure it was just a coincidence.

After about half an hour, Richter decided to test his new spells. He

had started treading water and raised one arm well above the surface. Memories of playing water polo flooded his mind. It didn't seem like a violent sport to most, but that was because the water hid the nut grabs and gut punches. He had tread water for hours in practice, but his form had never been so fluid and sure on Earth. He barely bobbed in the water. Whatever else might be true about The Land, it had given him a body with superhuman capabilities.

He began the incantation. Richter focused his conscious thoughts on the spell and let the back of his mind worry about staying above the water. His fingers were cocooned in magical blue energy and he spoke words of Power. He cast *Weak Swift Swim*. The blue light on his hand spread over his entire body. A second later, he started smiling.

Water was inherently buoyant. Richter had always defined that as, it helped him not sink. For the first time, he felt like the water was actively holding him up. Treading water hadn't been hard before, but now it was effortless. With a quick beat of his legs, he surged even further out of the water and stayed like that with no problem. The chaos seed spent a moment just doing laps across the river. The water seemed to part in front of him and he left small furrows in his wake. With a smile still on his face, Richter cast his next spell, *Summon Weak Aether Carp*.

Three seconds later, a portal appeared in the water. Richter felt a rush

of cold when the water from wherever the fish was coming from rushed into his plane of existence. A five-foot carp with steel-grey scales swam through. Richter guessed that it had to weigh fifty to sixty pounds. It had a broad downturned mouth. It didn't have any teeth that he could see, but he could see it causing some damage if it rammed him at full speed. Even more interesting was that as it moved, wisps of purple and blue energy escaped from its scales in spots. It left a faint trail of light behind it as it swam around him in lazy circles. To Richter's surprise, a bar of purple appeared underneath his mana bar and a prompt appeared in his vision.

*Know This! You have summoned an **Aether Carp**. This creature will serve not only to protect you, but will also augment your mana. Water magic that you cast in its presence requires 5% less mana.*

Richter had never been able to summon a creature that augmented his own magic! With the casting cost being only forty-two, it was more than worth the mana expenditure. He would regenerate that in less than two minutes. He was starting to see what Randolphus had meant when he said that rarer spells were powerful despite being low level.

He looked the fish in the eye and made a mental connection with his Psi Bond ability. The bond was a paltry, flimsy thing, limited by the carp's inferior intellect. For his purposes, it was enough. He enjoyed making the fish swim here and there, watching the blues and purples it trailed behind it.

Richter ultimately dismissed the creature. The portal reappeared and it swam back through. Strangely, he didn't feel any rush of cold this time. Once it was gone, he climbed out of the river and reached into his bag. Pulling out his Fish Ring, he took off his Ring of Minor Healing. He slipped the Fish Ring on, giving himself three minutes of air underwater. The other ring went into his bag. Then he cast *Teatro's Weak Water Casting*. If the spell description was right, he should be able to cast *novice* level Life, Water and Dark spells underwater. Richter had no idea why those particular spell schools were allowed, and not the other five Basic Elements, but it was still cool.

He finished the four-second casting and then jumped back into the water. He swam down several feet, then looked back up. Even after months in The Land, it was the simple things that amazed him. With a bit of trepidation, he took a breath. When he found that, once again, he could breathe underwater, a look of boyish glee overtook his face. He test-cast *Weak Dark Bolts*.

His fingers moved into a specific configuration. It took a bit of mental forcing to make his conscious mind speak underwater, but there was no ill effect when he did. The water did not even enter his open mouth, which let him know that even without the Fish Ring he would be fine. Other times he was able to drink with the ring on, but the spell kept his mouth dry.

More importantly, two bolts of Dark Energy shot from his hand and through the water. The spell worked!

He tried several other spells from the requisite three spell schools and they all worked as well. On a whim, he tried to cast an Earth spell, *Weak Paralysis Beam*, but his mouth filled with water as soon as he started. He thought a green glow might have flickered around his fingers, but it could have just been his imagination.

Richter climbed out of the water and walked over to his Bag of Holding. He switched the two rings back and then just lay there on the grass. The fading light still shone down through the trees. Even though it wasn't high overhead, the sun was warm and pleasant as his skin dried in the air. Soon he was dry and he took out a clean set of clothes.

After he was clothed again, he put his weapons harness back in place. As a reflex, he lifted both blades ever so slightly from their sheaths to make sure they could be drawn quickly if needed. He walked back towards the village gate. It was near dusk now and he caught sight of fireflies across the fields. The guards saluted as he entered the village. Richter was looking forward to the party that night, and by the smiles of many of his people, they were as well.

It was remarkable how much difference a day made. The village had

mourned together only the night before. There were certainly still tear-streaked faces, but those who had lost a loved one had been given another day off. Richter had even insisted on it. Randolphus had had food and drink prepared for them all day. Overall, he could tell that his people were content.

He crossed into the village and was about to turn right towards the feast area when he had an absolutely awesome idea. He turned left instead and ran up to one of the paddocks. After a quick bit of pilfering, he had the item he needed. Then it was time to join his people.

Just as Richter had expected, Randolphus had taken care of everything. A high table had been set up and more tables were arrayed before it. His villagers and the newly freed slaves were mingling and tables laden with food were dotted across this new impromptu campground. His people began cheering as he ascended a small stage the chamberlain had brought over.

“Greetings, people of the Mist Village!” he began

The response was loud and emphatic, “Hail, Lord Richter!” “We love you, my lord!”

Richter cocked his head, expecting one more cheer. His eyes eagerly scanned the crowd, but nothing else was forthcoming. Well played, he thought, and continued his speech. “Tonight is about celebrating life. It has

a come with a high cost, but we are still here!” More cheers met his pronouncement.

“Before we do anything else, let us celebrate the men and women, of all races, who fought for us!”

The cheers and roars of celebration were thundering. The fighting men and women stood tall and looked ahead, many prouder in that moment than they had ever been in their lives. Richter let it go on for long minutes before silencing the crowd again.

“I am proud to have fought and served with each and every member of our army,” he shouted. “I am equally proud to have fought alongside our honored allies, the wood sprites.” Richter turned towards Hisako and bowed deeply. The Hearth Mother inclined her head and smile broadly at the respect he paid her. More cheers rang out.

“Hooray for our allies!”

“The wood sprites are always welcome at my table!”

“I love those little guys!”

Richter held up his hands again until the tumult died down. “As I said, I am proud to have gone into battle with the people of the Mist Village and the sprites of the Hearth Tree. I wish I could single out each and every one of you, but-”

“But there is drinking to be done!” Sion called out from behind him. *That* got an especially loud series of cheers.

Richter rolled his eyes at his best friend, but he was smiling as well, “*But*, I would be speaking all night if I spoke about the heroism of all who had gone into battle with me. I will commend six special individuals who distinguished themselves in battle, however. When I call your names, step forward.” His voice gained the crack and snap of a military leader, “Captain Terrod, Sergeant Caulder, Guard Ox, Guard Schroeder, Meidon Sprite Kentyiro, and First Meidon Sprite Sion, stand with me!”

His Companions and Caulder exchanged surprised glances. They had had no idea this was going to happen. He had asked Terrod, Hisako and Sion to ensure that Ox, Schroeder and Kentyiro were near the stage respectively, but hadn’t told them they would also be part of the ceremony. All six did as they were told, however. A minute later they were assembled.

“These six men fought in my own warband. They were so ferocious and unyielding that the Universe itself recognized their prowess!” Shouts and calls of congratulations rung out. Richter stepped in front of Schroeder and placed his hand on the guard’s shoulder. A prompt appeared to both of them explaining the field advancement he had earned and why. Richter bestowed the advancement and read it aloud so all could hear.

*Congratulations! A leader's true strength stems from his followers. Six members of your War Party have distinguished themselves in battle and can now be promoted with **Field Advancements**. To activate these promotions, you must personally bestow them upon your party members.*

*For fighting while wounded and slaying many foes despite his injuries, Schroeder has earned the Field Advancement: **Unconquerable Soul I**. When his health is below 20%, the damage of each incoming attack is reduced by 1.*

Schroeder's eyes widened. A boyish smile peeked out from beneath a mop of brown hair. "Thank you, Lord Richter!"

"You deserve it," Richter answered with an echoing smile. Roars of appreciation were coming from villagers and freed captives alike. The former slaves knew they owed their freedom to these men and women. With an inner smirk, the chaos seed realized his fighting men and women wouldn't be short of loving company that night. He moved to the next man in line, Guard Ox. For each of the six, he spoke aloud both their advancement and what they had done to earn it. The applause was deafening.

*For strangling a goblin fighter with his bare hands while in battle, Ox has earned the Field Advancement: **Fell Clutch I**. +1 Strength when fighting unarmed.*

*For having the blood of over ten enemies sprayed upon his face without wiping it clear, Kentyiro has earned the Field Advancement: **Never Wincd I**. His visage will be fearsome to behold in battle. +3% chance to cause Fear status among enemies that can see his face.*

*For shouting rallying encouragements that increased the Fighting Spirit of the allied forces of the Mist Village and the Hearth Tree, Caulder has earned the Field Advancement: **Cried Aloud I**. He may now invoke “Rallying Cry,” a battle technique that will increase the Attack and Defense of any allies who hear it by +1 for 5 minutes. Cooldown: 20 minutes.*

*Know This! Sergeant Caulder has progressed in his fighting abilities so remarkably that he is now considered a **Champion** in battle. Any allies fighting within 100 yards of him now have +1 rank in Fighting Spirit. This is not cumulative with other Champions.*

*For being driven mad at the death of a comrade and finding a rage-fueled strength that led to the death of many adversaries, Terrod has earned the Field Advancement: **Wrath and Tears I**. He may now invoke “Wrath,” a battle technique that provides +1 to Strength and Constitution for 10 minutes. Cooldown: 1 hour.*

*For fighting with a ferocity that made the goblins think he was death incarnate, Sion has earned the Field Advancement: **Horror of the Shade I**.*

Enemies are hesitant to even look upon such a fearsome warrior. +1% to dodge and +1% chance for enemies to lose sight of him in battle.

Sion and Caulder had also progressed in their old Field Advancements.

*For standing against a sea of countless foes and remaining strong, Caulder has advanced a Field Advancement to **Stem the Tide III**. +3 Defense to each piece of Medium Armor he wears.*

*For relentless hand-to-hand combat against a dangerous and more powerful racial enemy, Sion has advanced a Field Advancement to **Bathe in Black Blood IV**. Sion now has +4 damage when fighting goblins.*

Sion had initially earned his promotion *Bathe in Black Blood I* by fighting against goblins, the racial enemy of the sprites. Seeing him jump from rank I to rank IV in a single battle also helped explain his ominous new Field Advancement, *Horror of the Shade*. The battle had been so crazy that Richter had often lost sight of his best friend. For the sprite to have killed enough goblins to jump three levels though, he must have been truly terrifying to behold.

Field Advancements could be a real force multiplier. Fighters had to fulfill a specific set of criteria to earn them, then the War Leader they were fighting under had to bestow the promotions. After that, as long as they were

fighting in a warband, the advancements could continue to level based on the person's actions without any input from Richter. Caulder was turning into a tank that now also had an AoE capability to bolster his comrades. Sion was now essentially death incarnate when fighting goblins. Richter wouldn't be surprised if the sprite had a slayer title of his own. Terrod looked like he might have gained a type of berserker rage. It was only +1 to Str and Con, but if the other Field Advancements were any indication, he could keep leveling it up. +10 to both could really let him do some damage.

The fact that Richter, Sion, Terrod and Caulder were all Champions now also meant the village's forces would fight harder than ever before. The village was currently rank one in Fighting Spirit, giving a 5% bonus to damage in battle. When his people were fighting near a Champion though, that bonus increased to 10%. The bonus unfortunately didn't extend to Champions themselves, but it could make all the difference to the armies they led. That was a mechanic about which Richter still understood little, but what he did know was that killing the enemy's Champions could make an army break and run in terror. The only downside to that plan was that Champions were typically the biggest badasses in a fight.

The crowd cheered at seeing these men, these heroes, grow in power. They had fought for the village, and they were "of" the village. More than a few of the men and women watching thought, "If they can do it, then why

can't I?" Richter saw the fierceness in his villagers' faces, and so wasn't surprised when he got another prompt.

Know This! Your act of honoring the strength of your fighters has inspired your people. You have fulfilled your promise that as you rise in power, they shall as well. +10 to village Loyalty!

He still wasn't done. Shouting out to the crowd, he asked, "My people, do you not think that such brave men deserve honor as well as power?" The answer was a resounding 'Yes!' "I believe so as well," Richter agreed, shouting over the crowd. Before the noise even died down, he said, "First Meidon Sion, your authority is officially recognized by the Mist Village. In matters of war, your authority is second only to my own. You and Captain Terrod will have equal rank. While he leads the guards, you will lead the meidon sprites." He had already discussed this part with his Companions, but his friend was still moved. Sion bowed his head, and brought his fist to his chest in humbled acceptance and salute. Terrod clapped the sprite on the back with a broad grin on his face.

"You will need a second-in-command," Richter said, continuing to shout over the crowd. "Do you accept Kentyiro to serve beneath you in leading the meidon warriors of the Mist Village?"

"I do," Sion said picking his head up and smiling. The words were

mere formality as the two friends had already discussed it. The shock on Kentyiro's face was priceless. Richter had to struggle to keep from laughing. The man had been a forest sprite before he bonded with his pixie. Forest and wood sprites really didn't get along, classically. It wasn't a racial hatred, but more along the lines of how city and country folk just didn't see eye-to-eye. That had played a role in the decision. In addition to Kentyiro being a fierce warrior, Sion and Richter had thought choosing a sprite that had been part of another race to be his second-in-command could help remove any lingering divides that existed amidst the meidon sprites.

“Do you accept this honor?” Richter asked. When Kentyiro numbly nodded, still shocked, the chaos seed boomed, “So be it. You will have military rank in the Mist Village equivalent to Sergeant Caulder. After myself and Sion, you have command over the meidon sprites.” The cheering hadn't stopped. To round out the pronouncements, Richter made Ox and Schroeder both corporals in the guards, reporting to Sergeant Caulder. Richter was delighted when another prompt appeared in his vision.

Know This! Not only have you kept your promise to share power, but you have given your villagers positions of authority as well. This resonates well with your entire populace. Previous award of +10 to Loyalty has been increased. +20 to village Loyalty.

“Mist villagers,” Richter called out, raising a hand for quiet. “Mist

villagers, we are not alone here. There are others among us. Men, women and children. Dwarves, humans, elves, sprites and gnomes that were enslaved by the goblins. By the blood of our people and lives of our allies, these people are now free. Will we honor their sacrifice?”

The cheers and shouts were truly overwhelming. Richter smiled at his people and didn't try to quiet them this time. He looked around at the others at the high table and saw that they shared his happiness. The Hearth Mother smiled easily and even Yoshi had one corner of his mouth upturned. Richter turned back to the crowd and couldn't still the mischief in his heart. He cupped one hand to his ear like he couldn't hear the shouts and cheers. His people laughed and cried out even louder. He laughed heartily along with them, and then waved for them to quiet again.

After a minute, he looked out over the crowd and specifically made eye contact with as many of the freed prisoners as possible. A smile lay lightly on his face, but there was also a serious look in his eye. The entire feast area grew quiet while they waited for his next words.

“This world is not safe. We all know that. We have all lost people we cared about.” Richter made eye contact with everyone at the high table again, and they each nodded back. The Land was full of magic and wonder, but it did not change this harsh reality. Even the bravest could fall. Richter looked back at the crowd again and emotion shook his voice, “But we... are

still... here!” The thunder of his people shook the feast area. “We are stronger together and I believe, no, I know, that together we can overcome the forces that are conspiring against us. Make no mistake, there are people, bastards,” Richter spat, “that want to take what we have built. Will we let them?” Richter shouted.

“No!” was the resounding call.

“We will kill them!”

“I will follow you through death, Lord Richter!”

“Lord Richter!”

“Lord Richter!”

“Death to the enemies of the Mist!”

“Lord Mist! Lord Mist! Lord Mist!”

Even Richter was taken aback by the vehemence of his people and was surprised by what apparently was his new moniker. He had expected a show of solidarity, but both men and women were on their feet. They were shouting at the tops of their lungs. In their faces he saw passion, devotion... and zealotry. These people were truly with him. They believed in him and they would die for that belief. Richter could see that they would kill for that belief. What’s more, many of them seemed positively thirsty for blood. It was with a shock that he realized something: his people were predators.

He had wanted the freed prisoners to know how united the Mist Village was. They had been shown that beyond a shadow of a doubt. It may have even been a bit too strong a show of support. The former slaves had been smiling, but now, after hearing the bloodlust in his people's voices, many looked about fearfully again.

"My villagers," Richter called out, silencing them a third time. He needed to portray the right message. "We are strong as individuals, but we are stronger together. Do I speak truth?" Another chorus of 'Yes' and 'Aye' rang out. "But our strength is not enough. We stand for a greater ideal, do we not?"

"Yes!" rang out from hundreds of mouths.

Randolphus stepped forward, "Through service, ascendance!"

"Through dedication, transcendence," was the thundering reply.

"What that means," Richter called out, everyone quieting now without needing prompting, "is that you may find a home here as well."

It stayed quiet as all the former prisoners looked at one another. Who was this strange lord speaking to? Who would be allowed to stay in his village, and more importantly, what would they have to do? Months and years under the lash of goblin overseers had taught many of them to fear happiness and kindness. The pain that followed was always worse.

Richter let them process for a few moments before speaking again, “My invitation is to all of you. No one will be allowed to stay without first being interviewed by my truthsayer, but if your heart is true, you can find a home here. I do not promise you safety, for only fools or liars would make such a boast. I will make you the same promise that I made to every single person in my village. As I rise, so shall you, and no matter what comes in the future, I will stand with you to meet it.”

Some of the freed slaves looked like they wanted to ask questions and speak up, but Richter forestalled the potential pandemonium. “Any who wish to return to their old homes, I will do what I can to see you safely returned. You must know that my people have their own enemies though, so as I said, I cannot promise you safe passage. In either case, you have time to decide. There is plenty of time to discuss these things later. Tonight is about celebration. Enjoy my hospitality. Meet my people. Breathe free air. Tomorrow will come soon enough. In the meantime,” and a grin found its way back onto Richter’s face, “we will show you that no matter what else is true of us, the Mist Village knows how to party!”

Cheers rose up again. Richter was about to gesture for the feast to begin when he saw Sion walking towards him. The sprite gestured, asking if he could say a few words. Bemused, Richter agreed. His friend clapped him on the shoulder, then took his place at the front of the small stage. All

quieted to hear his words. In solemnity and all ceremony, Sion raised a mug. Then a crazy grin of his own stole across his face and he shouted, “Let’s get pissed!”

Cheers and laughter rang out over the crowd, freed prisoners and villagers alike. Richter looked at his friend in amusement, who laughed maniacally before quaffing his ale. It was a good moment.

That was when he felt it. Before it even happened, Richter knew it was coming. It was like he was suddenly gifted with the power of foresight. Even with this sudden awareness, he was too slow. By the time he had turned back to the crowd, the perpetrator was hidden amidst the hundreds of people gathered for the feast. The echoing call still hung in the air though, the mocking invitation of a quest Richter intended to complete...

“GNOMES RUUULLLLLLLEEEE!!!”

CHAPTER 35 – Day 142 – Kuborn 32, 0 AoC



The party was a success.

The koran tuskens from the Dungeon were absolutely delicious. The village cooks had followed his directions and several were roasting over pits. His people had seasoned them with basic spices such as salt, pepper and sage, and had also glazed some of the pigs with a sauce rendered from wild fruits. Richter's mouth was watering when he dug in.

There were fresh loaves of bread, churned butter, seasoned vegetables and cold drinks. Ale flowed freely. Some of the dwarves bemoaned the fact that Zarr the Earth mage was absent for his Trial. The geomancer's spell to increase the potency of mead and other alcoholic beverages had already become legend. That sadness only lasted until Richter revealed his moonshine.

The chaos seed had let the complaining go on for about thirty minutes. Then, with evil in his heart, he took one of the clear glass bottles

from a mist worker holding them. He walked over to a particularly loud table of dwarven miners and set down five small cups along with the hooch. They greeted him with smiles, but still continued their complaints about the booze, as dwarves were wont to do.

He told them that he might have something they would like. Richter poured a shot into each of the cups, though he made sure he poured a triple shot for the dwarf that had been talking the most shit. He told them that the drinks must be downed all at once, and then raised a toast to the Mist Village. The dwarves couldn't ask any questions about the clear liquid, or they would risk being rude. Dwarves could be as rough as a sandpaper condom, but none would give the grave insult of refusing a toast unless they were prepared to spill blood. To a man, they downed the rotgut Richter had poured them, and that was when the party really got started!

Coughs and hacks were punctuated by callused hands slamming on the table. The dwarf Richter had given the triple shot to could barely breathe. He just looked at Richter with tears running down into his beard. The chaos seed didn't make it any better when he cackled and pointed his finger into the miner's face, "Hahaha! I got you good, you fucker!"

The dwarves all thought it was a pretty good joke, once they could breathe again. When he left them the rest of the bottle, he became their best friend. Richter repeated his prank five more times before people began to

catch on. After that, he just passed the bottles around and the party kept going.

The freed prisoners were initially hesitant despite his speech, but another truth that seemed to transcend all boundaries was that good food and strong booze made everyone family. At least for a while. His people mingled with them and many of the wood sprites shared in the celebration. Terrod had ordered some of the guards to stand watch of course, and Hisako had contributed her own troops to assure the safety of the village. Nothing was ever sure in The Land, but Richter felt like his settlement was reasonably safe that night.

The pixies joined the feast and began to sing. To Richter's relief, their song was one of joy. They flew above the heads of all present. The song was initially faint, but it grew in volume quickly. The intensity and beauty of the sound was more than the small beings should have been able to produce. They flew in intricate patterns, trailing pixie dust. In the center, the queen hovered. Her voice filled the miniature cracks in everyone's soul, and they felt complete and unified. The pixies' ability triggered:

*Know This! You are basking in the **Song of True Welcome**. Life is to be treasured, but it always takes a toll. Nerves will fray, hurts will accumulate, and the spirit, initially pliable and open, can become cold and withdrawn. Listening to this celestial song brings all who hear it to a warmer and more*

open state of being. +100% to Positive Relationship changes for the next 7 days. “The only thing that we have found to make the emptiness bearable is each other.”

Richter looked around at the former prisoners, and saw that their wariness was fading away. The people moved around and smiled a bit more freely. Some of the villagers climbed onto the small stage and began playing a country tune. After that, only minutes passed before the tables were moved out of the way and people began to dance. The center of the feast area became a potpourri of different styles. From what Richter could see, some high elves were doing a waltz while wood elves danced right next to them shaking their bodies with abandon. The dwarvish men did a stomping hop that had well-defined steps while the dwarven women jeered at them good-naturedly. Some of the gnomes looked to be doing a square dance, of all things, and the humans just swung each other around with joy. It was a complete mess.

Richter loved every moment of it.

Something strange happened in the middle of the party. Richter experienced a weird sensation, like he felt when he entered the Dungeon. That was diffuse though, and this felt targeted off somewhere behind him. When he turned to look in that direction, the feeling disappeared. It made him curious, but then Deera danced in front of him, swirling her skirts. That

was a much better use of his curiosity, he decided.

About two hours into the festivities, Richter was sitting down at a table when he caught sight of a familiar redhead making her way through the crowd. Richter was feeling no pain by this point, and he held a bottle of moonshine loosely in one hand. He had left the high table long ago, and had enjoyed a few turns on the dance floor. Now he sat talking to one of the freed prisoners, Enalise. She was a human who had not one, but two, Professions. She was both a Miner and a Crafter. He had just about convinced her to give him some tips in both.

“I am not sure that I want to stay in this little forest village you have,” the Miner was saying with a faint smile on her face. Richter had been generous in sharing his moonshine, so she was feeling quite alright herself.

He had been about to answer, but catching sight of Lorala pulled his attention away. Enalise followed his gaze, curious as to what had him suddenly so distracted. When she saw the voluptuous wood elf, she took an immediate and irrational dislike to her.

“Well met, Lord Richter,” the redhead said with a small smirk.

“Hello, Lorala,” he replied slowly. His gaze roamed over her body as he said it. Her cream-colored skin was beginning to tan in the summer sun. It brought out a smattering of freckles that he hadn’t seen before. They

further cemented the head cheerleader vibe he had always had of her. Of course, the supple dress she was wearing didn't hurt either. It was pure white with a bit of lace on the hem. It was clear she had been dancing as well, judging by the grass stains on her bare feet and the fact that the fabric of her dress was stuck to her body by a faint sheen of sweat. Not for the first time, Richter thanked Abrams and Whedon that bras hadn't been invented yet in The Land.

“Who is your friend, Richter?” Enalise asked sweetly. Turning her attention to Lorala, “Would you like something to drink? Or maybe a towel?”

Sensing the danger in the air, Richter hesitated for a moment. Lorala spoke up before he could answer, “Oh we are more than friends, sweetie.” Her voice was as sugared as children's medicine. “Much more. You are so considerate to look after my appearance though. Not many would offer to give when they have so little themselves.” She gave a tittering laugh and rested one hand on Richter's shoulder, “My name is Lorala.”

“Ha ha ha,” Enalise responded with absolutely no mirth. “You are so amusing. You may call me Crafter Enalise.” She put the faintest of emphasis on her title. Then she adopted a speculative look for a few seconds before saying, “I should have guessed your name was Lorala.”

“Oh?” the elf asked mildly. Her tone was light, but her nails dug ever so slightly into Richter’s shoulder. For his own part, the chaos seed decided to operate by dinosaur rules. If he stayed absolutely still, maybe the two snarling monsters wouldn’t see him.

“Of course,” Enalise said with a smile. “Loral? Lore? I assume every man in the village has knowledge of you.”

Gaaawwwdd-damn! Richter thought.

The elf bared her teeth in a way that only a blind man wouldn’t recognize as a snarl, though Richter supposed it could be called a smile. “Lord Richter, you have such interesting friends. You really should come dance with me, however. Look how exhausting your conversation has been for poor Enalise. She looks absolutely dreadful!”

“Richter,” the Crafter began, again leaving off his title as if to illustrate the independence she possessed but Loral lacked, “and I were having a wonderful conversation. I am sure he would like to continue it.”

“Is that so?” Loral asked archly. She stared daggers at the woman, but then turned her attention to Richter. Enalise did the same. “Lord Richter?”

As two angry sets of eyes bored into him, one a soft brown and the other a startling green, all Richter heard was General Ackbar saying, “It’s a

trap!”

And then Richter’s Luck stat came through. Beyan, his Death mage gnome, walked up - or perhaps stumbled up - to the table with two mugs of ale. Even the bald top of the gnome’s head was red with drink. “My Lord! We haven’t shared a toast to your victory! Will you join me?”

“Of *course* I will, my friend,” Richter replied quickly with a broad smile. In his head though he was just wondering how his balls could possibly have gotten so sweaty in such a short amount of time.

He stood up and took a mug from Beyan. After clinking them together, he and the gnome downed their glasses in one fell swoop.

“One more,” the gnome slurred and pulled Richter away from the table to refill their glasses. He just looked back at the two women with a helpless smile on his face as Beyan dragged him off. They both glared daggers at him, but Richter decided that was a worry for another time.

When they were out of earshot, Richter leaned over and said, “Beyan, you have no idea what you just helped me out of!”

In a voice much more clear-headed than the one he had used only moments before, Beyan replied, “I know exactly what I just helped you with. I normally do not insert myself in other’s affairs, but in my culture, we have a motto that we live by: *Frie Cudere*.”

It only took a moment for Richter's Gift of Tongues ability to translate. When he did, he found a renewed faith in the interconnectedness of all things. No matter what world he was in, there would always be a "Bro Code."

Richter laughed aloud and threw his arm around Beyan's shoulders. "You're my boy, Blue!" The two of them had several more drinks and the party continued. After a particularly strong round of shots, he shouted, "Everybody gets lucky in the Mist Village, now who wants to see my Luck stat!" As Richter recalled, there were quite a few hands that shot up.

Krom made himself known with an old mountain drinking song. Every comment he made was answered by a listening crowd of dwarves with either a sad "aww" or a jubilant "yah!"

"Me lassie yelled..."

"Awww."

"That she loved me cock!"

"Yah!"

"But she couldn't walk..."

"Awww."

"Til next week!"

“Yah!”

“Then ay ran out of ale...”

“Awww.”

“Because ay drank it all!”

“Yah!”

“The tavern were dry...”

“Awww.”

“As rain at sea!”

“Yah!”

“There were only one barmaid...”

“Awww.”

“For every dwarf!”

“Yah!”

“They had no curves...”

“Awww.”

“That ay couldn’t touch!”

“Yah!”

“There were a fight...”

“Awww.”

“We beat their arses!”

“Yah!”

“But ay go thrown in jail...”

“Awww.”

“It were full of whores!”

“Yah!”

“They cost a silver...”

“Awww.”

“Ay had a gold!”

“YAH!”

“Me lassie left me...”

“Awww.”

“But sister found me!”

“Yah!”

“Now me story be done...”

“Awww.”

“Until next week!”

“YAAAAHHHH!”

After the call and refrain the dwarves had just danced around, drinking, singing and head butting each other. This time, Richter was smart enough to avoid that particular form of celebration. He also learned a great deal about dwarven philosophy that night. It started when he joined a table of miners. One of them was saying another liked to pleasure men with his hands. He was doing the universal “jack off” gesture, but with a curious adaptation. His arm was twisted so that so his thumb was pointing down.

Curious as hell, Richter had asked, “Why is your arm twisted?”

The dwarves looked at each other like the answer was obvious, “I was saying that he stroked men’s cocks, yer lordship. I wasn’t saying that he liked it.”

Richter’s face made it clear he didn’t understand, so the dwarf explained. “This way, when he be stroking the shaft, he can also give a thumbs down. That way everybody knows he’s not enjoying it. It be part of the rules.”

The chaos seed looked at them in drunken bemusement, but the other dwarves all blearily agreed. Another chimed in, “It just be the rules, milord. Like if two dwarves be huddling for warmth in the cold, it only be weird if the little spoon pushes his butt back.”

Richter was about look at him like he was crazy too, but then thought about it, and said, “That math checks!” They all cheered and handed him a pint of ale. Downing them in one go, they slammed them down on the table and one shouted, “What’s math?”

The party continued!

Another hour passed and the festivities showed no signs of stopping. Richter was telling one of his “original” stories to a crowd of onlookers when Sion walked up. This one was about a magical black carriage that could speak. The carriage and its rider, Michael, rode around and solved crimes. Usually at night.

The sprite wasn’t alone. Like everyone else, he was fully drunk and had his arm thrown around the shoulders of a particularly attractive gnome woman. “I am telling you, he does it!”

The woman shook her head in disbelief, and Sion looked at his best friend, “Tell her. Tell her how you got hit with a lightning bolt during the last party.”

Richter shrugged and cast a drunken smile at the pretty gnome, “It wasn’t a big deal. My familiar... where is she?” He looked about until he saw Alma sleeping on a nearby table. “My familiar,” he repeated, pointing, “can throw lightning.”

“Are you going to do it again?” she asked, excited.

“Everyone,” a second villager called out, “Lord Richter is going to get shocked again!”

The news spread like wildfire and soon more than a hundred people were walking over. Richter looked at Sion who was brushing the top of the gnome’s breast with one hand and smiling maniacally at the chaos seed at the same time.

Dude, don’t make eye contact, Richter thought. He had been going to refuse, but everyone now walking towards them had started chanting his name. He couldn’t let them all down, now could he? Still, he begged off several times, which made the chanting even louder. Finally, he ‘relented.’ “I’ll do one! I’ll do one!”

The crowd went nuts.

Richter walked over to the table where Alma was sleeping. “Alma,” he said drunkenly. “Alma, we have to do the trick. Hey! Wake up!” He punctuated the last command by poking her in the belly.

The dragonling opened one eye and snarled at him, **Whatd’ya want? No, it doesn’t matter. Go away, drunken master!** Then she closed her eye and tried to go back to sleep.

Richter paused for a moment. Not because he was daunted by her

refusal, but instead because he just started thinking about how that was an awesome movie. **Jackie Chan! Waaaaa!** he thought back to her, doing his best karate sound.

Alma ignored him.

“Come oooon,” Richter whined poking her in the belly again.

“Everyone is watching.” He swayed slightly back and forth. His Constitution stat of fifty-six let him metabolize alcohol quickly, but he was still feeling no pain after downing a ridiculous amount of spirits. Richter poked her one more time, and the dragonling seriously considered biting his finger off. Then she came up with a better idea.

Rousing herself from her comfortable position, she thought to him, **Of course, master. Whatever you think is best.**

Now, her overly-sweet tone should have been more than enough to tip him off to the danger, but he was drunk on more than just booze. The cheers and shouts were feeding his slight megalomania, a tendency that had been with him ever since he’d played Civ ten. Civ nine had been his first game, but everyone knew that the even numbers were the best ones.

So, full of piss, vinegar and moonshine, he hopped up onto the table while Alma looked at him balefully. The villagers surrounded the table and shouted, “Lord Richter! Lord Mist! Lord Richter! Lord Mist!” Then it just

became, “Mist! Mist! Mist!”

Richter looked at his familiar and the fierce look in her eye. He began to have his first misgivings. Her lightning spell was only *weak* class, and he did have a +50% resistance to Air magic, but still... she looked kinda mad. It was hard to tell with her draconian face, but he was almost sure she wasn't happy. It began to dawn on him that this might not be the healthiest course of action. It wasn't enough for him to puss out in front of all the people calling his badass new nickname, but it was enough for him to send a short message to Alma.

I don't really remember last time love, but I know you got me in the chest. Let's do it that way again, okay?

Alma just looked at him and began to glow yellow.

Okay? Just like last time? Alma? Alma? There was a hint of panic in his thought patterns that grew as she didn't answer. Then there were no thought patterns for a time. All Richter experienced was a bright flash and then blackness.

Alma lay back down in a huff. She sincerely hoped that a lightning bolt to the face would teach her master a lesson. She was almost sure that it wouldn't though. The dragonling was still grumbling to herself as she went back to sleep.

Richter regained consciousness with a multitude of hands lifting him to his feet. His villagers were surrounding him, with claps on his shoulders and cheers all around. He thought he heard Sion scream in delight, “She shot him in the face. In the faaacccceee!” It might have been his imagination though. He had a debuff that said *Concussed*.

The villagers helping him up thought he was just mumbling when he said, “Is show gud win ih his yur libs,” and then grinned like an idiot.

The party kept raging!

When Richter’s mind cleared a few minutes later, he realized he’d been sat down next to the dance floor. He was sitting on the ground with his back to a bench. For a moment he just enjoyed existing at that particular elevation and seeing skirts twirl as the women spun about. Then his eyes came to rest on the stage where the band was playing... and he remembered!

Forcing himself unsteadily to his feet, he made his way to the wooden platform. He hopped, not quite gracefully, up onto the stage. Everyone around, at least six sheets to the wind, cheered and wondered what new stupid human trick he was about to show off. Richter reached into his Bag of Holding and grabbed the farm implement with one hand. With the other, he pulled the dagger from his belt, scabbard and all.

“My people! There is something you have to know! I have a fever...

and the only cure...” he held the item in his left hand high, for all to see, “... is more cowbell!”

That was, by popular consensus, when the night went from *good* to *great*.

CHAPTER 36 – Day 143 – Kuborn 33, 0 AoC



Richter woke up with a hangover.

It was actually more like there were two sweaty trolls with dysentery in his mind and they were having a slap fight. He didn't know what had woken him, because everything was just a haze of *bleh*. After he had blinked several times though and done his best impression of a blind vole tasting beets for the first time, he realized that there was a light in the room that shouldn't be there. His addled mind went through the count. There were two mist lights on the ceiling at all times. The faint glow was enough for him to see by, but also dim enough to easily go to sleep with. Those two were in the right place, but there was another light only a foot above his head that pulsed slightly. He figured out the mystery all at once.

“Futen.” That word came out like a snake sliding through burnt paper. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Futen.” It sounded exactly the same. Rolling his eyes, he slowly sat up. The remnant flowed out of the

way. Looking around, he saw a mug on the side of the bed. He picked it up and sniffed. It wasn't completely horrid, so he took a sip to moisten his mouth.

Mistake.

“Gahhh, gak, glack,” he protested while he swallowed whatever foul concoction had been inside. He was sure he didn't want to know what that was. It had a thick coating on top and was somehow spicy. Some things were better left unknown. The experience served its purpose.

“Futen. Why the hell are you in my bedroom?” His voice sounded half-human now. His mind was racing as flashes of the night came back to him. Had he really seen a drunk Water pixie shit in someone's glass when she wasn't looking? A flash of panic shot through him as he looked at the mug in his hand. No. No. Still better just not to know.

“You told me to follow you to your room, my lord,” came the monotone reply. “You wanted more light for yourself and your guests.”

Confused, Richter looked behind him at the rest of his bed, and his eyes widened. Shit. There were four sleeping figures. “Futen!” he whispered urgently, “tell me I took the Star Zenia.” The herb was truly amazing. It was basically a viagra-condom combo. All the fun, none of the friction.

The remnant just hovered for a moment before responding. The white light at the center of Futen's core pulsed slowly. Somehow, Richter felt like he was being judged. "Yes, my lord. You ate three herbs if I remember, then stated it was time to, 'stir the mashed potatoes.' Then you added, 'I hope there's no cheese.' After that grand pronouncement, you climbed into bed with the others. One minute later, you shouted, 'Oh no! There's cheese... and lumps!' An hour later you sent me to see if any other ladies wanted "a humpin'" and called me 'the best Tinder ever.'"

Richter scratched his balls as he listened to this, still thirsty as hell. He couldn't bring himself to drink any more of what he had found. He stood up and walked over to a desk. Another flagon of the unknown waited. After sniffing it he immediately put it back down in disgust. He couldn't place the smell but he was fairly certain one ingredient of the stinky potion was "the cheese."

"Why did you stay?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"You ordered it, my lord," the remnant said in an *almost* completely deadpan voice. "You stated you were going to 'grow me up' then proceeded to do some truly strange acts while laughing and shouting 'there are some things you can't un-see, Futen! This will be with you forever!'"

"Hehe," Richter startle to chuckle. His laughter ended abruptly when

the light in the room grew substantially brighter, eliciting a grunt of pain from the hungover chaos seed. He glared squintily at the remnant, sure that the orb had done it on purpose. Before he could make his accusation though, Futen reminded him that he had asked for a wakeup call to get an early start on his day.

Still glaring, Richter just nodded and said, “Right. Well done. I guess thanks then.” He shook his head to clear the mutton that someone had shoved inside it. “But do that *after* you find the cooks and have them make two plates of eggs and some of the ham leftover from last night.”

“Would you like mead to go with it?” Futen asked. To Richter, while the remnant’s tone said “I’m a weird deadpan floating light,” his subtext said, ‘I’m a judgy, constipated, floating asshole.’

Richter started to yell at the remnant, but then stopped and thought about it. A bit of the hair of the dog that’d bit him might actually do some good. He told the remnant to have it all set up in the feast area. He’d come out to eat. He also stressed that there needed to be four large pitchers of water. Then he sent Futen on his way. The remnant floated off, still putting out way too much light in Richter’s opinion.

The chaos seed looked back at the bed and the four people in it. On the far side, a mop of red hair made identifying Lorala easy enough. The

next two forms belonged to the twins. The woman closest to him was new though. She was laying on her stomach with her head turned away from him. Her skin was a rich chocolate topped with jet black hair that hung straight down past her shoulders. He couldn't make out many details with only the mist light illuminating the room, but what he saw, he liked.

Richter closed his eyes and cast *Simple Light*. Easing his eyelids open, he found he could tolerate that level of brightness, so he started slowly pulling back the covers. The black woman's lithe frame tapered down to an even smaller waist, but then things got... plumper. Her well-shaped ass rose up in a nice swell, more than enough to cup, but not so big she'd knock over cups when she turned. Pert, he decided, was the best word for it after a minute of intense study. Unable to help himself, he slowly drew back one hand, and, maintaining proper form throughout the procedure, quickly brought his palm down in a perfectly executed Jumanji Jiggler. It was a technique his church youth group leader had walked him through long ago.

As he watched the pleasing ripples spread from one cheek to the next, he waited for a response. Richter had expected her to wake up. Maybe turn towards him with either a smile, a frown of annoyance, or some combination of the two. He couldn't have been more wrong, or more delighted, with the result.

She didn't wake, but that didn't stop her from groaning slightly and

lifting her hips with a wiggle. Is she asking for another? Richter asked himself, bemused. He looked down at the little minx with a smile on his face. A few moments later, she settled back down and sank deeper into sleep. He covered her back up and used *Analyze*, and found out her name was Carei. As he got up to leave the room, he allowed himself one final thought: That's not a moon, it's a space station.

Richter walked down the hall towards the Great Seal. As he did, he passed an open room and did a double take. His best friend was limping slightly as he made his way to the door. Behind him, still sleeping on the bed, was the gnome woman Sion had been with earlier. The sprite grimaced when he saw him, knowing some smartass comment was coming.

The chaos seed decided to take it easy on his friend. With a friendly grin, he asked, "Good night?"

The sprite looked back with an aggrieved expression, "Just because you find a guy tip-toeing around in his smallclothes, you assume the worst."

Richter raised one eyebrow, looked at the woman sleeping on the bed and then looked back at his friend.

Sion shrugged and then, with a smile of his own, replied, "Gnomes rule."

Richter gave a short laugh and fist-bumped his buddy, "Breakfast?"

“Breakfast,” came the satisfied reply.

The two of them left the catacombs and by unspoken agreement made their way to the latrines. Right before they got there, Richter looked side-eyed at his best friend and couldn’t help himself.

“Make sure you wash your face when you’re done, man,” he suggested innocently.

“My face?” Sion asked confused. He raised one hand to wipe away whatever spot Richter was seeing.

“Yeah,” Richter said brightly. “If it’s true that you are what you eat, then you’re clearly a gnome woman with low standards.”

Sion’s confused face slowly shifted to enlightened irritation. He opened his mouth to give a scathing retort, but Richter interjected, “Oh! Looks like one’s free.” The chaos seed beat a hasty retreat into an unused outhouse, chuckling all the way.

The sprite was standing there with an annoyed look on his face. Then, with extreme hesitance, he pursed both lips and took a deep sniff. Now furious, he quietly said, “Gods damn it,” but he resolved to wash his face as soon as possible.

After the necessities had been completed, though it needed to be done twice in Richter’s case thanks to a false stop, they walked over to the feast

area. There were people passed out all over the place. More than a few were naked.

One blond human was just sitting by himself on one of the tables. He listed slightly to the side, but despite that, he still held one of Richter's clear bottles of moonshine. The two friends shared a disbelieving look when the man tipped the bottle back and took a sip. How could he still be drinking?

As they passed, Richter used *Analyze* and found out his name was Nic. Richter called out, "Hey, buddy. Hey." At the second call, the man looked over and Richter asked, "Whatcha got there?"

Nic looked at the booze in his hand as if surprised it was there. The man was bleary-eyed but still managed a bright smile when he proclaimed the bottle's name, "Breakfast!" Then he took another swig and resumed staring off into the forest.

Sion gave a surprised grunt and just said, "Respect."

Richter nodded his agreement and they walked over to a table where a village woman had set down food and drink for them.

"Great party," Sion commented as they looked out over the grounds.

Richter breathed a large sigh of accomplishment, "Yeah."

The two of them sat down to eat. They talked about this and that. Sion agreed to organize the meidon sprites into strike teams along with the

guardsmen. The parties would be limited to five members, as any more people would mean a drop in the XP they gained from killing enemies. A group of two guards, two meidon sprites and perhaps a caster should be able to handle most monsters of the forest. Sion agreed to talk to Terrod about making integrated groups. Richter wanted the sprites and guards to get used to working together.

He stressed that he wanted the archers to use *Soul Trap* arrows and bring back as many souls as possible. Richter also wanted a list of several integrated teams made of the strongest fighters, but only those who had sworn fealty. These teams would start farming the Dungeon as soon as possible. He didn't know how large it was, but based on the cavern system he had run through before it became a Dungeon, it was at least big enough to accommodate several teams at once.

Alma flew up while they were talking. She landed unceremoniously and started eating meat off Richter's plate. He started to pull his meal away in jest, but a deep-throated growl let him know she wasn't in the mood. That sound triggered a memory.

Did you shoot a lightning bolt into my face last night, you little beast? he asked accusingly.

I healed you after, she said, sounding not at all apologetic. Alma

neglected to say “way after.” She also didn’t look up or stop eating when she added, **You deserved it.** Then she sent him a mental replay of what had happened.

After seeing the damning evidence, Richter just shrugged. He couldn’t argue with her logic. Turning his attention back to Sion, he got his friend to take on the task of organizing the villagers with Herb Lore skill to search the surrounding forest for any useful plants. They would need protection of course, but that was also good training both for the new integrated strike teams and the village’s noncombatants. Back when he’d been a gamer, escort quests had always been the bane of his existence, mostly because the NPCs being escorted were morons who ran at the sight of every monster. Richter had no intention of his people being eaten because they didn’t know how to follow the orders of his soldiers. Best just to get them in the habit.

Richter thanked his friend for handling the task. Tabia still needed more raw materials to replenish the village stockpiles of health, mana and stamina potions before the battle. Richter also asked Sion to add any useful herbs he found to the Well of Offering. Then it occurred to the chaos seed that Sion might not have access. Checking the interface, he saw that he was right, but it was easily fixed. Richter gave Sion, Hisako, Randolphus, Terrod and a few others access to the Well. It also occurred to him that he could just

leave the Well of Offering open to anyone, but then he thought about the potential for abuse. What if someone dropped something down the well that gave the monsters an ability he didn't know about? That might be enough to finish him. Richter tweaked the Dungeon system to alert him whenever the Well was used, just to be safe.

After a while, other people joined them at the table. Richter had found that he enjoyed the normalcy of breaking bread with his people. He was also pleased to see that at least some of the freed prisoners felt comfortable joining him as well. Surrounded by the sounds of happy chatter, Richter finally felt cogent enough to deal with some of his prompts from last night.

You have learned the enchantment **Life Aura, Level I**

Enchantment Size: 4

Enchantment School: Life

Effect 1: *Life Aura* – Each rank gives +1 Damage/5 seconds against Death creatures that come into contact with the enchanted armor. Weaker Death creatures will also be discomforted or turned away by even being near items enchanted with *Life Aura*. Range: 5 feet.

Richter was not disappointed. He'd just found a way to be radioactive

to the undead. This was the kind of awesome enchantment that had led him to his Profession in the first place. He planned to start ranking it up as soon as he got to the Forge. He absently started investing his mana overflow into unlocking the second level of *Life Aura*, but he didn't plan on devoting all his energy to it anytime soon. He would need to use his magic to battle and explore.

There were other prompts waiting for him, and new skills. Apparently, he'd put on quite a performance.

*Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: **Singing**. Not all magic requires mana. By raising your voice, you have enspelled your listeners. Not all have the affinity, but masters of this skill can calm the fiercest dragon.*
+2% to max vocal volume. +2% to breathing capacity.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 2 and 3 in **Singing**. +6% to max vocal volume. +6% to breathing capacity.*

*Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: **Percussion**. While some might hear only the clanging of sticks together or the banging of metal, you hear a symphony. True masters of this skill can cause walls to crumble.*
+2% to drumming speed. +2% to max complexity of beats.

Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 2, 3 and 4 in Percussion.
+8% to drumming speed. +8% to max complexity of beats.

*Congratulations! You have learned a new skill: **Gambling**. “I pity those who never know the depths of despair from a bad roll of the bones, for it means they will also never know the high, for that sweet fleeting moment, of being first among men.” +.25% to **Luck**. +1% to **Intuition**.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 2, 3 and 4 in Gambling. +1% to **Luck**. +4% to **Intuition**.*

The last prompt gave him pause. He certainly didn't remember gambling the night before. He wasn't bothered by the fact, and he couldn't have lost too badly seeing as how he was still Master of the village. Honestly, one of his favorite pastimes on Earth had been sharing scotch with friends while whiling away a night over a green felt table playing Texas Hold'em. Not knowing if he'd won or lost though did bug him a bit. Anyone who'd ever woken up owing a three-hundred-pound bouncer a stack of weed pancakes and a lotiony foot rub would understand how he felt.

Richter just resolved to ask around to see if anyone could tell him what had happened last night. He wasn't complaining though, no matter what the story was. Gambling was the first skill he'd found that gave a direct boost to his stats. +1% wasn't much, but he could see how a highly skilled gambler could really take advantage of the perk. It also favored anyone that decided to invest their precious stat points into Luck.

The secondary boost from Gambling was interesting as well. When he focused on the word “Intuition” a prompt appeared.

*Know This! You have increased a Secondary Attribute: **Intuition**.*

*Secondary stats can be governed by any number of factors, including but not limited to: your primary stats such as Strength and Dexterity, skills, bloodlines, and/or abilities. No one has ever fully quantified the number of secondary stats which exist. **Intuition** is your ability to assess the “feel” of a situation. Your base Intuition is +1. Most sapient creatures in The Land have a baseline Intuition of +1.*

*Total Intuition: **+1.04***

Again, the +4% Intuition boost from his new Gambling skill didn’t mean much yet, but it could add up over time, especially if he found a way to increase his base stat. He put thoughts of gambling out of his mind and thought about his other new skills. Richter started tapping out a beat on the table. As a child he’d played Beats with his friends and had only been middling at it, if he was being honest. Now, however, with his superhuman Dexterity and new skill, creating a complex rhythm was easy. Almost unbidden, he started singing one of his favorite songs from childhood. He got lost in the melody, and didn’t notice that everyone else had fallen silent for minutes.

“What was that language?” Sion asked. “It seemed harsh, but beautiful.” The sprites were a naturally musical people. The first time Richter had heard them speak, it had sounded like soft woodwinds.

Richter had to think a moment, and then he realized he’d been singing in English. “It was a song from my homeland. Just a little ditty about a small-town girl, who lived in a lonely world.”

“Sounds sad,” Sion commented.

Richter shrugged, “All true stories are sad sometimes. It’s what makes them beautiful.” There was silence at the table for a moment, then the conversation picked back up. A few minutes later, two elves began another song. Their voices floated in the early morning air, soft and soothing. It was, Richter realized, perhaps the best breakfast of his life.

CHAPTER 37 – Day 143 – Kuborn 33, 0 AoC



After the meal, the chaos seed felt a bit more like a complete person. The hangover was still there, but as always, greasy food and a little more booze worked wonders. The two friends left the table and started their day. Richter told Sion to gather all of the meidon sprites at the Forge before they went Dungeon diving. Each and every one of the meidon sprites had sworn fealty to him. He had already awakened Life and Air magic in some of them, it was time to awaken it in the rest.

Sion nodded and split off. Richter walked over to the Forge. Alma flew east into the forest to begin her daily hunt. The day was somewhat overcast and he saw darker clouds over the mountains to the north. There would most likely be rain later in the day, but for now the air was pleasantly warm. The dwarven smiths were all present in the Forge, though a few of the human smiths were absent, probably still sleeping off the party. The building rang with the clanging of hammers and the crackling of fires. The dwarves

were clearly in a good mood as they went about their work. You could say what you wanted about their taciturn nature, those guys could drink!

They greeted him with cheers. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who had enjoyed himself the night before. Bowdin walked up and told him they were ready to start enchanting if he was. Richter slapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously, "Let's do this."

Right out of the gate, Richter started with another dual enchantment. A high steel dagger was ready. He had resolved that he wouldn't use any more souls that were *luminous* or higher, unless it was a high-quality blade. This particular dagger was only *exceptional* in quality, offering eighteen enchantment slots with his Talent bonus. That meant all he needed was a *common* and a *basic* soul. This time he tried a different combination. Now that he knew the knack, it was much easier. The fact that he was using weaker souls probably had something to do with it as well. After a short struggle with the soul stuff, he created his second dual enchantment.

You have	Attack: 8-11
enchanted:	Durability: 42/42
Shadow High Steel	Item Class: Uncommon
Dagger of Life	Quality: Exceptional
	Weight: 1.6 kg

	Traits: +10% Damage vs Spell Barriers Ignore up to 4-5% of armor +2 Life Damage* Charges: 196/196 <small>* +100% vs Death creatures</small>
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His hair stood out the same as before, and Richter had to focus fully on his task, but he gotter dun. The smith that had forged the blade was extremely pleased that the weapon had been enchanted so well. Richter even gained 7 Relationship Points with the dwarf. It was a negligible amount, but it was something.

Richter kept at it.

You have enchanted: High Steel Dagger of Frozen Beast Slaying	Attack: 7-10 Durability: 46/46 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 1.7 kg Traits:
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	<p>+10% Damage vs Spell Barriers</p> <p>+15% Damage vs Beasts</p> <p>+2-3 Water Damage*</p> <p>2-3% Chance to <i>Freeze</i></p> <p>Charges: 88/88</p> <p>* +100% vs Fire</p>
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<p>You have</p> <p>enchanted:</p> <p>High Steel Mace</p> <p>of Sonic Beast</p> <p>Slaying</p>	<p>Attack: 13-20</p> <p>Durability: 46/46</p> <p>Item Class: Unusual</p> <p>Quality: Superb</p> <p>Weight: 3.3 kg</p> <p>Traits:</p> <p>+10% Damage vs Spell Barriers</p> <p>+53% Damage vs Beasts</p> <p>+6 Sonic damage*</p> <p>6% chance to <i>Disarm</i></p> <p>3% chance to <i>Shatter</i></p> <p>Charges: 472/472</p>
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The mace he planned to give to Caulder. It still left the problem of getting Terrod a new blade though. Bowdin promised that he would have something ready by the end of the week. Something special that Terrod would be able to use with his current stats. That brought Richter to the darkstone blade.

“What do you mean you haven’t attached it to a hilt yet?” Richter asked, slightly irritated. Bowdin wasn’t the village Smith, but in the days since Krom had been gone, he had been impressed by the other dwarf’s attention to detail. This felt like a letdown. He’d wanted to practice with it in the Dungeon.

“I have an idea that will just take a bit more time, yer lordship,” Bowdin explained. He was clearly excited. “I promise the weapon will be ready before the battle with the lich lord. Will ye give me the time to make it great?”

There wasn’t much Richter could say to that. He wanted to test his new toy out, but he could wait if Bowdin had a cool idea. The smith didn’t want to spoil the surprise, so Richter just let the matter drop.

The chaos seed spent another hour or so enchanting. Hunters and

sprites came to the Forge periodically to gather *Soul Trap* arrows and empty soul stones. The village's stores of metal were not endless though. The nearby iron mine was a godsend, but it still required time to render the resource. There was plenty of iron ore that had been mined as the mist workers helped with that, but they were nearly mindless automatons. Even a *novice* with the Mining skill might produce a better yield than a mist worker. The only reason the mist workers were any use with a pickaxe was that the mine was filled with iron veins. Apparently higher-level metals needed those with the Mining skill, otherwise the ore crumbled into pieces too small to be useful or was extremely low grade.

Even taking ore production into account, the process of turning it into high steel was time-consuming. While there were stockpiles of the metal, they might run out of readily available ingots before the end of the week if production kept up at the current pace. It was a good thing they had a new labor force that was used to digging.

With that thought, Richter summoned Futen. When the remnant arrived, he sent him back out to find Randolphus and bring the chamberlain back to the forge. The chaos seed wouldn't force any of the freed prisoners to go back underground to work. He could well understand why that might be traumatic for many of them. He did plan to make them the offer though.

Anyone that wanted to join the village could start now as far as he

was concerned. He wouldn't give them immunity to the mists, but that wasn't a problem as the enchantment didn't extend underground. He would pay them at the same rate as everyone else, four silver a fortnight or two coppers and eight iron bits a day. Even those that wanted to leave might jump at the chance to put some coin in their pockets before they re-entered the world. With any luck, they might even find a vein of rarer metal.

He got back to work.

It was over an hour before Randolphus joined him. That was out of the ordinary, but Richter didn't mind. He had more than enough work to occupy himself between enchanting and improving his own low Smithing skill. He also trusted the chamberlain to manage his own time. The village would probably be a disease-filled, inefficient mess without the Spy's diligence. Richter also knew that one of the keys to success in any large organization was putting capable people in charge and then staying the hell out of the way.

By the time the chamberlain walked up, Sion had already gathered the meidon sprites. Predictably, every one of them was interested in having their potential magic awakened. To Richter's delight, every sprite that had bonded with a Life or Air pixie now had enough of a high enough affinity to learn the corresponding magic. It meant that the meidon sprites were not only fighters, but that their ranks had also added another forty-three new casters to his

village. Forty-three new magic users, and every one of them had sworn fealty to him.

Some of the sprites might have had a high enough affinity even before the meitu'meidon, but statistically, he knew it was the bonding that had made the difference. The incidence of having an affinity for a Basic Element seemed to be less than one in a hundred people. It might even be closer to one in a thousand for all he knew. There was also a clear predilection for certain races to be more or less likely to create certain types of magi.

Dwarves, for instance, were known to breed geomancers, whereas aeromancers were far less likely to appear in that population. Now, however, in less than thirty minutes he had made more than forty new Life and Air magi, with a 100% success rate. Once again, the Quickening proved its power in a subtle way.

A few had even been gifted with spells that Richter hadn't known.

Weak Life's Radiance: Creates a 5-yard radius of Life energy around the caster. All healing spells are 5% more effective to anyone within the boundaries of this spell. Life creatures are 5% stronger and Death creatures are 5% weaker. This is a spell of Life Magic, level 1. Cost: 58 mana. Duration: 5 minutes. Range: self. Cast Time: 2 seconds. Cooldown: 18 minutes.

Weak Honed Air: Creates an area of extremely compressed air around your weapon. Increases the lethal distance of your weapon by 3 inches. Enemies struck with this extended radius will not trigger enchantments in your weapon. This does not change the size classification of your weapon. This is a spell of Air Magic, level 1. Cost: 31 mana. Duration: 20 minutes. Range: self. Cast Time: 2 seconds. Cooldown: 18 minutes.

Weak Voice Displacement: Allows the caster to make his voice appear to come from a different location, up to 10 yards away. This is a spell of Air Magic, level 1. Cost: 17 mana. Duration: 12 minutes. Range: self. Cast Time: 1 seconds. Cooldown: N/A.

Richter told the three meidon sprites who received those spells to show up at the House of Scholarship at the end of the day. He intended to create spellbooks for each so that he could learn the new magic ASAP. Once they were part of his spell repertoire, his Mastery in Air and Life magic would let him share the spells with every other caster in the villager that had the skills. That was barring the children, of course. The meidon sprites that

had bonded with Dark and Water pixies were understandably disappointed that he could not awaken their powers yet, but he told them it would happen right after he achieved Mastery of those Powers.

He was in the process of sharing his known level one spells with the new Air and Life magi when Randolphus walked up. Richter noticed his chamberlain and said, “Ah good, you’re here. I have some ideas about putting our guests to work. I’m also about to go to the Dungeon. It would be great if you would join me again.”

Richter hadn’t really looked at his chamberlain’s face while he was talking. His attention was mostly on the sprites he was teaching. When Randolphus didn’t respond though, he looked over and stopped cold. He had never seen such a hard look on the man’s face. It was firm resolve mixed with anger. Knowing things were about to change, Richter asked, “Do I have time to finish teaching these spells?”

“Yes, my lord,” Randolphus replied solemnly.

The chaos seed finished imparting the spells his meidon sprites could learn at level one. Sion had picked up on the seriousness of Randolphus’s demeanor. All of the meidon sprites instinctually looked to him for direction because of his First Meidon ability, which made his leadership a foregone conclusion. He led them all away towards the main village gate, saying it

was time to organize the hunting parties.

Richter and Randolphus walked away from the Forge of Heavens until they were out of earshot of anyone else. Once they were, the chamberlain turned towards his lord and did not mince words. “There has been a murder.”

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Richter just stared at Randolphus, uncomprehending. He understood the words, of course, but he thought that there must be some mistake. His time in The Land had been a constant struggle. He couldn't even remember the faces of everyone he had killed. The blood of more than one *thousand* goblins was on his hands, but... that had been battle. That was war and that made it... okay. Didn't it?

His mouth tried to form words several times before he could actually move past his shock, "Are you sure? Maybe you made a mistake." He gestured to the villagers walking around. Despite the overcast day, people were happy and smiling, "No one seems upset." His tone was beseeching. The village was the one thing he could count on. It was what made the questionable acts he committed acceptable somehow. It was what vindicated his choices, the ones that kept him awake sometimes in the dark of night.

"I am sure, my lord," Randolphus answered definitively. "The body

was found in the pit the hunters use to dispose of the offal from their kills. He was a human and his neck was broken. It was one of the prisoners you freed from the goblins.”

“Couldn’t he have just fallen in?” Richter asked lamely. He knew that Randolphus wouldn’t have told him he was sure if there was any doubt. Like a man who’d been told he had days to live though, he was clutching at straws. Anything to try and rewind the clock by just a few minutes when everything had been okay. “Everyone was very drunk last night,” he added hopefully. Maybe whoever had died had just fallen into the pit by accident. If someone had died at his celebration because they drank too much, Richter would feel bad about it, but it would be much easier to deal with than a murder in his village.

“No,” Randolphus repeated with the same quiet conviction. It was clear to him now that his liege was having a hard time with this, but he would not soften the truth. “I have seen many ‘falls,’ in my lifetime. In my service to the old king of Yves, I arranged more than a few ‘accidents’ myself. I know the difference. This man was strangled. After that, his neck was broken and he was dumped into the pit like trash. It was a murder.”

Richter’s mood began to change. The gentle denial and sadness he’d initially felt was quickly being replaced by a burning anger. Someone had defiled the sanctity of his village. This was his home. He had built it from

nothing. Only hours before, he had made an offer to the freed slaves, saying it could be their home as well. Implicit in that offer was the idea that they could live here in relatively safety, that he would do his best protect them. And now? A vein in Richter's forehead began to throb. And now someone had not only disrespected his home, but they had made a liar out of him, showing people that there was no safety at all. Anything gentle inside of him faded far into the background, and the part of him that enjoyed the pain of screaming enemies rose to the forefront. He would not let this pass. With steel in his voice now, he gave a simple command, "Tell me what you know."

Randolphus nodded and began to speak. He was relieved that the momentary weakness he'd seen had passed. This matter had to be confronted directly and without delay. He knew from hard experience that such action was not something everyone could do. Some rulers were good with people but not battle. Others were callous and a small few were kind. Lords came in all shapes, strengths and sins. Any leader that wanted to live more than a short while had one thing in common, however. Almost any failing could be forgiven in a lord, but not weakness. Never weakness.

"I was notified about this hours ago," Randolphus began. "One of the hunters went to the skinning area in order to gather some snares that they make for small game. He noticed some drag marks near the pit. When he looked in, he saw the body. He came to find me immediately."

“Does anyone else know?” Richter asked. He had to know how widespread this information was. If it was widely known, the story could spread through the village like a wildfire, leaving fear and panic in its wake.

“I notified Captain Terrod,” Randolphus replied, completely understanding Richter’s unvoiced concern. “He is standing watch near the pit with several other guards. I was also forced to question several of the freed prisoners. As the victim was one of their own, it made sense to question them first. I ordered that they be sequestered.

“The hunter that found me, a high elf named Dobbs, readily agreed to keep the murder secret until we instructed otherwise. The other hunters know something is amiss, as Terrod is not letting them near the site, but they do not know what. I am confident that no other villagers are aware of what has occurred.”

Richter nodded his approval and indicated that Randolphus should continue. “That is why it took me so long to reply to your summons. Though I was tardy, my lord, the time was well spent. I have identified the culprits.”

“Someone confessed?” Richter asked surprised.

“I am a Spy whose focus is counterintelligence, my lord. Now that I am no longer sacrificing my skills and abilities to adopt another persona, you will find that not many can keep secrets from me. In speaking with the freed

prisoners, I have learned something troubling. Despite all having been in captivity, some of the people you freed were exploiting the others. Specifically, some of the higher-level men and women used the weaker captives however they wished.”

“Are you saying,” Richter began. He had to stop and start again, as the words were so sour they twisted his lips. “Are you saying that even though they were all slaves to the goblins, some of the people we saved were abusing their fellow captives?”

“Abuse and worse. Some of the captives were informers. They would report to the goblins if anyone were not working hard or if any were considering resistance. In return for this betrayal, they were given extra rations and the goblins did not interfere if they wanted to use the other slaves for their amusement.”

Richter’s jaw tightened. Nothing the chamberlain was saying shocked him. He knew that evil existed everywhere. On Earth, the news was always filled with atrocities happening in the inner city or in countries on the other side of the planet. His understanding of the atrocities men and women committed had always been academic before now, however. To actually have rapists and traitors in his midst filled him with anger. Knowing that it continued to happen even after they had been freed, even after so many of his people had died freeing them, filled him with rage. Not trusting himself to

speaking yet, he gestured for Randolphus to continue.

“It was a simple matter to discover the victim had a sister. From there, I learned that two of the men used to rape the dead man’s sister regularly in the cages. After that, it was simple to learn the rest of the story. The murdered man had not dared to stop the rapists while they were captives. The goblins apparently had been very creative with the tortures they enacted on anyone who opposed their pet informants. Now that they were no longer under the goblins’ control, he stood up for her. The two men are both level twelve and have invested heavily in Strength. Their victim was only level six.”

“How do you know about the dead man’s level?” His Analyze skill couldn’t target creatures that had been killed, unless they were undead.

Randolphus understood what he was saying, “Your skill is impressive, my lord, but my own Talents and skills have a versatility that yours do not.”

Richter nodded. It was always good to remember that as powerful as he had become, there were other beings even more powerful with capabilities he lacked. Arrogance was often a person’s *last* mistake.

The chamberlain continued, “With their increased Strength and greater numbers, the woman’s brother was overpowered. The two men apparently killed him before dragging her off and using her again.”

“Last night?” Richter said, seething. “They raped her here?”

“Yes,” Randolphus replied through gritted teeth. His professional mask finally cracked and he showed his own anger. Where Richter’s anger was hot, the Spy’s fury was as cold and merciless as ice. “The area you cleared in the mists for the party was large enough that they could go almost to the eastern wall. That is also why they were able to reach the pit to dispose of the body.”

Richter cursed. There was nothing of importance on the eastern side of the village. It was mostly just empty space. Since there were so many of the captives, he had let the clearing in the mist extend out to the wall. The walls on that side of the village were always manned by guards, so he hadn’t thought there would be any harm. It had been an innocent kindness in his opinion. Apparently even those could be corrupted.

Richter was tired of hearing the story. He wanted to act. “You have the two men in captivity?”

“I do,” Randolphus replied. “They have been bound and are under guard by Captain Terrod. After I identified them, I spoke to the woman they abused. She has been beaten and was initially afraid to speak. When I assured her that she was safe from any retaliation, however, she told me the entire story. One of the men is quite aggressive and is proclaiming his

innocence. The other is clearly a follower and became tearful when he was arrested.

“Once I separated them, it did not take long to elicit a confession from the sad one. He corroborated the woman’s story almost verbatim. He quickly stated that it was the other man who had killed the woman’s brother. In his words, he had ‘just been trying to have some fun.’” Randolphus almost spat as he repeated the coward’s words.

Richter internalized everything he was hearing. He didn’t want to get off-topic, but he had to ask, “Did you torture the man to gain his confession?”

Randolphus looked him directly in the eye and in a measured voice responded, “No, my lord. That was not necessary, in this case.” The Spy put just the slightest bit of emphasis on the last words. Richter wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Once upon a time, it would have gone completely against his beliefs to use torture in a system of justice. Yet it was true that both he and Sion had tortured people before. They had been goblins though, and it had been during war... Richter’s internal protestations sounded weak and hollow even to him. The fact of the matter was he was not above using pain when the situation called for it. Was it really any different in this situation? He put the matter aside for the moment. “Is there anything else?”

“Unfortunately, there is, my lord. During the course of my

interviews, I learned the identities of the other prisoners that had been giving information to the goblins. There had been mumblings of this the first day the captives arrived, but I had not had the chance to discover the truth. After the incident, however, I spoke with dozens of captives separately and they provided the same names each time. The likelihood that this is a coordinated conspiracy to malign these fourteen is extremely low.”

“Fourteen?” Richter asked, his voice rising. Unless he heard something remarkable in the two men’s defense, he was already fairly sure what he was going to do. Now that there were twelve more though... could he really... He needed time to think. “Where are these others?”

“I did not take any action against them as of yet, my lord,” Randolphus answered. “I decided it would be best to bring this to your attention first. I sincerely doubt that the freed slaves have not been speaking amongst themselves, however. Whatever is to be done, I believe it should be done quickly.”

The chamberlain’s advice was more than sound. It was exactly how Richter had always lived his life. “Indecision causes confusion, confusion causes accidents, and accidents cause death.” Mama’s advice still rang in his ears at pivotal moments. He wasn’t perfect and he knew he never would be, but he’d be damned before he’d be indecisive. It was time to act.

“Find Caulder. Have him gather more guards and round up the other twelve. Have them bound. If Sion hasn’t left to go hunting, enlist the help of the meidon sprites as well. Use the feast area and have the fourteen perpetrators placed in front of the stage. After that, bring everyone we freed and all of the villagers.”

Richter stared hard into his chamberlain’s eyes, “And I mean everyone. Even the miners, farmers, smiths, fishermen and gardeners. We won’t wait for any hunters or guards on patrol to return, and leave the guardsmen on the walls where they are, but everyone else needs to be in attendance. I want them to see this. Use Futen to get everything done as quickly as possible. Invite Lady Hisako and adept Yoshi to come as well. I am going to the Quickening. Send word to me when everything is ready.”

Richter began to walk off and Randolphus called after him, “What is it you plan to do, Lord Richter?”

The chaos seed stopped walking. His shoulders slumped slightly and in a resigned voice, he answered, “I plan to see justice done.”

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Richter made his way through the village. His people greeted him with their customary smiles, but it did nothing to improve his mood. He looked up at the overcast sky, and the ubiquitous grey seemed appropriate. The chaos seed did not pause when he walked by the guards stationed at the hill. Instead, he kept moving until he reached the Quickening. It was the soothing aura around the celestial tree that he was after.

Once under the silver canopy, pixies flew around above his head. Richter walked up to the silver trunk. He put his hand on the smooth wood and closed his eyes. For a full minute, he just breathed in and out. The calming energy exuding from the tree helped to clear his mind. After that, he sat down and started doing some mental exercises he had learned from Alma.

His Self-Awareness skill increased both his mental and emotional stability. At level seven, he received a bonus of +14% to self-control. The

primary reason that he had begun this mental training was that using Deeper Magic had a tendency to unbalance him, sometimes hazardously. Blood Magic put him at the mercy of his passions. He acted impulsively even if it put his life in danger. Spirit Magic ramped up his ego. It made him feel like he could accomplish anything, inducing a sense of mania. It also felt amazing. His cravings to use it again made him think of it as almost a drug.

Deeper Magics were incredibly powerful, but Richter had not been able to use them safely until Alma had helped him to gain a measure of control. Through their deep psychic connection, she had helped him both build up mental defenses and improve the skill. She had even helped him build a fortified mental area in what she called his “mindscape.” It was a representation of the village, but with a small barbican that symbolized his mental defenses. When he used Deeper magic, he imagined his mind inside of that fortification. As long as the mental version of him stayed safe, he had nothing to worry about.

While originally that had just been a mental exercise, Alma had shown him it was actually interactive with the greater world. Now when he cast Deep Magic, he actually saw Blood Magic as an encroaching red haze that couldn’t penetrate his mental defenses. Spirit magic manifested as specters that were similarly rebuffed by his mental walls.

Richter placed himself in his mindscape now.

When he had initially heard about the murder, he had felt betrayed. Not by the men who had committed the act. He felt as if the village itself had betrayed an unspoken covenant between them. To be perfect. To be the one thing he could rely upon in this violent world. Richter knew intellectually that his reaction made no logical sense. He also knew that didn't matter. You could not apply rational arguments to solve an emotional problem. Thoughts and feelings were not necessarily oppositional, but they were two distinct paradigms of existence. There might be overlap, but each operated by its own set of natural laws. What that translated into was that if Richter was going to find peace, he needed to deal with his emotions, not intellectualize why they were not valid.

Richter settled himself into a kneeling position under the Quickening. He had tried meditation before on Earth, even going so far as to adopt a lotus position, but it had always felt like he was going to tip over. Kneeling was good enough for him.

For the next several minutes, he took cleansing breaths. Once he felt reasonably centered, he summoned his mindscape. A representation of the village appeared in his mind. The one addition was the fort of his mental defenses. He stood atop its ramparts and looked around. The walls of the village were the boundaries of his conscious mind, and near the periphery he imagined a pool of filth. Those were his negative feelings about the murder.

Richter had long ago learned that the first step in dealing with negative emotions was to accept that they were part of you. A basic mistake that people made over and over was to try and deny the worst parts of themselves. 'I'm not angry, jealous, vindictive, petty, etc.' Though it was only natural to shy from difficult truths, denial did not give you control over yourself. It merely ignored a part of what you were. That was actually the complete absence of control. It was why people suddenly snapped or boiled over. No, Emerson had been right. "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."

Richter examined his feelings. For long minutes, he confronted his anger, his sense of betrayal and his sadness. Another wonderful perk of his mindscape was that it changed how he perceived the flow of time. When he committed his consciousness to the psychic plane, time moved slower. Alma had told him that the deeper their bond, the more he would benefit from this shift in perception. At Psi Bond level six, time moved six times slower. Spending ten minutes meditating gave him a full hour to confront his feelings.

Once he was emotionally ready, he imagined cutting a trench in the ground near the pool of filth that was filled with his negative thoughts and emotions. With sludge-like slowness, the ugliness drained out of his mental village. Then he thought of his resolve to do whatever the situation required

as a cleansing rain that blanketed his mental village, washing the last of the negativity away. The more he used his mindscape, the more impressed Richter was with its power. It might only be an example of mind over matter, or it might be his proximity to the Quickening, but afterward, he felt much more at peace.

It wasn't long after that Hisako found him, "Your chamberlain has told me what has happened, Lord Richter. I am sorry this has come to pass." Her voice was soft and sympathetic.

Richter looked at the sprite Master, "I am going to listen to the story from the accused, but," he paused and took a deep breath, "if what Randolphus told me is true..." His voice firmed and his tone was as implacable as gravity, "If these men raped and murdered in my village, I am going to kill them."

She was silent for a moment. When she spoke, there was neither agreement nor condemnation in her voice, "You must do what you believe is right. No matter what you decide, I am your ally."

He looked at the redheaded woman, really looked at her, for the first time in a while. Her fine, asian-appearing features communicated a solidity and understanding that he imagined must have come from decades of rule. Part of him had hoped that she would provide some perfect words of

wisdom. That she would tell him what to do and he wouldn't have to decide the fate of fourteen people. When she finished speaking, he realized that wasn't going to happen. Hisako didn't give him a false smile or a stern judgement. She just stood there and gave him her support.

A few moments later, Richter realized that was enough. He stood and smiled at her. There was no real happiness in the expression, but it was still warm. It was a show of appreciation that did not need to be explained. The two leaders stood there for a time, listening to the pixie children's innocent and unaware peals of laughter. Elora flew down from the branches above and shared their company. The three of them merely existed in that frozen moment of peace until reality forced it to shatter.

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Randolphus approached with a grave expression upon his face.

He bowed to Hisako and Elora, who inclined their heads in turn.

Then he turned to his liege, “It is time.”

Richter asked Elora to stay behind so that she could keep her children near the tree. The pixie queen, though young, understood what was to come and readily agreed. She had seen many horrors before being cocooned in the chrysalis so long ago. The queen had no desire for her children to see the trial.

The chaos seed reached into his bag and pulled out his swords. He also donned his armored boots. Other than that, he wore no armor; the enchanted blades were enough to illustrate his power. Long ago he had been told that while the badge of a police officer was the symbol of his authority, his gun was the power behind that authority. All knew Richter was the lord of the village, but a visible reminder of the power he wielded might serve him

well in the next hour. With that done, Hisako, Randolphus and Richter began their walk.

The trinity moved in silence through the meadow, though there was a laughing tumult around them. Randolphus had gathered all the village children, and the children of the freed prisoners, and brought them up from the village. The former prisoners' children were huddling together as they could not see far in the mist, but it was the work of a moment to clear a suitable area. Soon they were all playing in blissful ignorance. A dozen villagers were assigned to watch them. Their own expressions were slightly strained.

Every adult in the village now knew what was about to happen. They bowed to the rulers as they walked by. Richter returned the respect, but did not tarry. The three continued down the hill and into the village. No one was milling about. The ringing of the Forge was silenced. No smiling faces greeted Richter. The village was waiting, breath caught, tense in the silence.

It seemed to Richter that it took no time at all to reach the feast area from the night before. More than a thousand people stood in a half circle in front of the stage, villagers and freed captives intermingled. Kneeling before the simple wooden platform were twelve men and women. Some looked angry, some cried silently, and some just wallowed in grim acceptance of whatever was to come. Guards stood behind them, keeping them down.

On the stage itself, two men stood, bound and gagged. One was actively struggling. His eyes were wild as he strained against the cloth in his mouth. He was well-muscled with olive skin and wild black hair. It took two guards to restrain him, one on each arm. Despite the obvious and precarious nature of his situation, he still glared defiantly at Richter as the chaos seed approached. The other man just stood quietly off to the side, bound, restrained. His head hung low and he had an air of defeat about him.

The murmuring crowd quieted as Richter ascended the stage. Hisako and Randolphus stayed with him. Terrod stood at attention near the two captives. With a loud and official voice, Richter barked, “Report!”

“Sir!” Terrod replied loudly, clapping his hand to his chest. The easy humor that normally typified the man’s demeanor was absent. Today, he was a soldier who was duty-bound to keep the peace and his lord had given him an order. The captain relayed the events for all to hear. How the body had been found. How the freed prisoners had been questioned. The report ended with the arrest of the fourteen men and women. The one still straining against his bonds, Lieb, had injured one of the guards with a rock. The damage was minimal however, and had already been healed. The other, Paulen, had been taken with no difficulty. Lieb shouted against his gag during the entire recitation of events.

Richter used *Analyze*.

Name: Lieb	Level: 12	Disposition: Loathing
	Race: Human	
STATS		
Health: 180	Mana: 90	Stamina: 160
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 42	Agility: 12	Dexterity: 13
Constitution: 18	Endurance: 16	Intelligence: 9
Wisdom: 9	Charisma: 10	Luck: 11
DESCRIPTION		
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 receive four points to distribute per level.		

Name: Paulen	Level: 12	Disposition: Apathetic
	Race: Human	
STATS		
Health: 160	Mana: 110	Stamina: 170
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 38	Agility: 13	Dexterity: 12
Constitution: 16	Endurance: 17	Intelligence: 11
Wisdom: 10	Charisma: 12	Luck: 10
DESCRIPTION		
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 receive four points to distribute per level.		

Randolphus had been right. Both of them had invested heavily in Strength but neglected their other stats. Back when Richter had been gaming,

they had a special name for people that built characters like that: “Vodka Shots.” Strong, but if they didn’t kill you with their first shot, you could easily wear them down with a higher movement and attack speed. They were also known as “Absolut Dumbasses.”

Richter turned his attention to Randolphus, “Is there anything else you have to add, Chamberlain?”

“Nothing that you do not already know, my lord,” the Spy replied.

“Then tell all who are assembled here why these men and women have been arrested. Speak clearly of their crimes and the evidence arrayed against them. I want everyone to know what has occurred. There will be no doubt in anyone’s mind that this village is a place of law.” Richter last words were more barked than spoken.

Randolphus gave him a slightly puzzled look, but did as he was commanded. He presented the evidence in the same way he had before. He detailed the body being found and his interviews with the freed captives. That led him to relate how he had identified the woman and how she had named her attackers. The chamberlain also spoke of how the men and women kneeling in front of the stage had been accused by many of the freed captives as being informants and abusers while they had been enslaved by the goblins. Much of the information was the same as Terrod had already shared,

which was of course the point of this for Richter.

A great murmuring was taken up by all present. There were shouts from the crowd condemning the bound men and women. A few of the kneeling captives cried out that they were being unjustly accused. Upon hearing that though, the murmurs coming from the other captives rose to the level of a clamor.

“Murderers!”

“Elom killed my brother!”

“He raped me!”

“Kill them! Kill them all!”

In the space of a minute, the noise of the crowd swelled in volume to a roar. The villagers were still talking amongst themselves, but the freed captives were working themselves into a frenzy. The months, or in some cases years, of abuse and degradation they had suffered at the hands of the goblins had created a festering rage that began to bubble over. Every hurt, every indecency, every beating was being remembered all at once. A monster was clawing itself up into the light. There was no doubt in Richter’s mind that it was ravenous and would only be satisfied with the lives of the fourteen people who were now on trial.

Richter knew he had seconds, not minutes, to regain control.

Speaking a word of Power, red light surrounded his hand, and a gout of orange flame shot from his hand. The show of magic quieted the burgeoning mob instantly. He stopped channeling the spell and glared at them all.

“I will have quiet!” the chaos seed bellowed. “This village is a place of law, not mob rule!” Alma took that moment to descend from above with a cry. She landed on his shoulder and hissed at the crowd. Flanking Richter were Hisako, Terrod, Caulder and Randolphus, standing resolute behind him. The show of strength and support was unmistakable. The crowd of freed prisoners were reminded that the man speaking to them was the same powerful being that had slain an army of goblins. They got the message.

“I, and I alone, will decide the fate of these men and women. You are here to witness my judgement. Any who wish to challenge my right to do so should speak now!” he shouted. He looked out at the crowd, daring anyone to step forward. No one did.

Turning his back on the crowd, he spoke to Sergeant Caulder, “Ungag the accused.”

“This is horseshit,” Lieb shouted as soon as his mouth was clear. Richter just looked at him, and what the man saw in his eyes quieted him though the arrogant expression did not fully leave his face.

“Speak when I ask you a question,” Richter told him coldly, “not

before.” The man glared back, but was smart enough not to directly challenge the leader of the settlement he was standing in. After staring down the captive, Richter turned his attention to the victim. *Analyze* showed him that her name was Gila. Softening his face, he gently asked, “Would you please tell your story? I promise you that you have nothing to fear from these men ever again.”

Gila was clearly still fearful. It made rage rise in Richter’s heart to see her battered face. Though he tried to hide it, she still felt his anger. She had learned long ago that she could still be blamed for the horrible things that others did to her. Though Richter was trying to put her at ease, he just looked like one more angry man blaming her for the sins of others.

Luckily, Hisako stepped forward. Though she was a fearsome enemy, the Hearth Mother could also exude a peaceful aura just by her presence. She furthered that feeling by casting a Life spell. As the bruises slowly faded from the woman’s face, Hisako embraced the woman. No one else ever knew what she whispered to Gila, but her face firmed somewhat.

A few moments later, Gila straightened and recounted the crime that had befallen her and her brother. Richter expected her to stop in the middle of her story, racked with sobs. That did not happen. Instead, she spoke in a detached voice, relating the horrors she had survived. This was somehow worse. It was like she was describing something that had happened to

someone else. Richter's hands started shaking slightly as he considered just how much pain and degradation the woman must have suffered for her to simply accept that such atrocities could be commonplace.

Lieb, of course, started shouting slurs and protests almost immediately. With a gesture, Richter had Caulder replace the gag so that Gila could finish. Once she was done, the cloth was removed again. Lieb wasted no time, "This is troll shit! You know your mouth is good for only one thing, slat!" He barked an ugly laugh, "Besides, I didn't do anything that she didn't want."

Richter didn't even have to speak up. Caulder backhanded the man with his gauntlet. Lieb fell to his knees, dazed for a second, but after a few moments he just grinned manically up at the sergeant. Part of his cheek had been torn and blood dripped from his mouth. Paulen, the other accused, watched Lieb's foolish bravado with a scared and sorrowful expression on his face.

"Do you have anything else to say?" Richter asked Gila. She shook her head. Richter had her led off the stage. He didn't want her in harm's way for what was going to come next. Then, with a cold voice, he looked back at Lieb, "Get that piece of shit on his feet. Cut him free."

The guards pulled Lieb up from the ground and cut his bonds.

Richter moved his arm slowly and everyone backed away, leaving him alone in the middle of the stage with the man. The chaos seed stalked towards him. Everyone watching could sense his violent demeanor, and knew that whatever was about to happen would happen soon. It seemed like The Land itself had caught its breath with how silent it had become.

Lieb just glared back at Richter and raised his fists. Whatever else was true about the man, he wasn't a coward. That didn't bother Richter. In fact, it just made what was coming more enjoyable. He stopped just outside of Lieb's reach and asked, as lightly as he could manage, "Now you were saying something about 'troll shit'?"

"Yeah," Lieb answered defiantly. He spat a bloody wad onto the wooden stage. Then he pointed at Gila in the audience, "That's my fuckhole, and her baby brother should have known better than to stand between me and my property."

Richter didn't understand how this man could stand there and say such things. He searched Lieb's face, looking for obvious signs of evil: devil horns, shark teeth or glowing red eyes. As he continued to observe the man though, he saw nothing more than a violent thug too dumb to keep his mouth shut but large enough to intimidate most people and take what he wanted. Maybe the man was evil, maybe he was a monster, maybe he was just someone who had been through horrible things. Richter's rational mind

posited several ideas to try and make sense of the man in front of him. To find some reason for why this person could be so hateful and damaged.

Then the strongest part of Richter took control, and he realized that none of that mattered. It was the part of him that didn't shy from difficult truths and didn't complain when there was something hard to be done. The truth was that the label "monster" didn't matter. The truth was that this man was a threat to the village. The truth was, Lieb wouldn't live to see another sunrise.

The part of Richter that discovered these truths understood that once you committed to a course of action there was nothing left to fear. It was only the jump that was worthy of trepidation. The fall afterward was... freedom. The muscles in his neck eased and his jaw relaxed. He was going to enjoy what came next.

Richter's pulse started to pound in his ears. The only reason he hadn't already opened the man from neck to pucker pie was that his entire village was watching. That fact wouldn't save Lieb, but the chaos seed was old school about discipline. If you administered a beating the right way the first time, the fear and pain could be an effective deterrent to future infractions. Lieb himself would not benefit from that knowledge, but the rest of Richter's villagers would.

Richter could barely control himself, but still he forced out one final question, “Do you deny any of the accusations that have been leveled against you?”

Lieb spoke again, completely ignoring the pleading, mewling sound Paulen made, “You don’t listen too good, do you, little lordling. I fucked that whore and I killed her brother.” Gila gave a frightened whimper and tried to hide behind the guard standing with her. “And I’ll tell you something else. You should never have cut my hands free.” With no further warning, he attacked.

Lieb threw a quick left jab, turning his hips in a practiced move he had performed for years. He followed with another left jab, then a right hook. He stepped into it and swung his right elbow into Richter’s jaw, and then snapped a short, straight punch into Richter’s face to finish the five-move combo.

Not one of the blows landed. Richter had been waiting for this very thing to happen. He had not increased his Unarmed Combat skill at all since learning the subskill Pressure Points so many months ago, but in The Land, skills did not always translate into success. Someone with a high skill level in swordsmanship might still lose to someone with better technique, stats or foresight. Richter possessed all three. Lieb learned what a difference that could make.

His Agility and Dexterity were three times what the heavily muscled man could call upon. While Alma launched herself into the air, Richter dodged both quick jabs, then took a wide step to the right to avoid the hook. The elbow fell well short and the short punch he knocked aside almost lazily. Richter's own Strength of thirty-three was a good deal less than Lieb's forty-two, but deflecting a strike wasn't a matter of brute force. It was speed and the application of energy. The rapist couldn't keep up.

Richter stepped past Lieb as the other man blinked in surprise at striking empty air. The chaos seed started speaking again, and his tone was almost... understanding, "You know, I get you. You were just doing what you had to do. You were bigger than that other guy, so you beat him up. You are bigger than this young woman," he said, "so you decided to rape and violate her." Richter continued to circle the man as he spoke, and the would-be rapist's face had finally started to show fear.

The change didn't placate the lord of the Mist Village in any way. The man's own admission had sealed his fate, but Richter found that he enjoyed the man's fear. There was no rush to end the charade. He stopped moving for a second and stared the man directly in the eyes. In that moment, nothing else existed but the two of them. Richter's teeth bared as he spoke again, slowly and with barely restrained venom, "I understand."

He took a deep breath and promised his inner fury that it could feed

soon. The chaos seed plastered a false smile on his face. “Now, the only problem with your goals is that I have to protect my people. Namely from murderous, rapist sons of bitches like you and your friend there. You understand that, don’t you?”

Lieb’s reply was to attack again. He aimed a brutal push-kick at Richter’s chest. It had no greater chance of landing than the earlier attacks. He followed it up with another one-two combo, but to Richter, the man might as well have been punching through water. The slow attack speed just couldn’t keep up with Richter’s high attribute values. As the chaos seed dodged to the side, he noticed a faintly glowing red spot on Lieb’s thigh. He jabbed two stiff fingers into the area and the leg spasmed. It wasn’t a debilitating strike, but it numbed the man’s appendage. Lieb was able to keep his feet, but he now had a limp that would last for several seconds. Richter continued pacing around Lieb, murder in his gaze.

Despite the death in his eyes, he spoke as if the second attack had never happened, “Both of you understand that, right?” This question was directed at Paulen as well. The man was weeping at this point. Richter considered telling him to accept his fate with dignity, but then decided it wasn’t worth it. He’d be dead soon enough.

“Please, my lord,” the crier begged. “I am so sorry! If you would only allow me-”

“No,” Richter said with finality. He and Lieb were still circling one another. “I do not need your apologies. You may apologize to Gila, however, when this is done. Until then,” and the last two words were spoken with quiet menace, “stay silent.”

Richter turned his full attention back to Lieb. The man was massaging his thigh and looked to have gained back almost full mobility. The chaos seed finished his point in a conversational tone, a shark circling with a full-toothed smile, “I am relieved to tell you that despite the fact that our goals are diametrically opposed,” he paused when he saw the look of confusion on Lieb’s face. “‘Diametric’ means... doesn’t matter. The point is, despite the fact that we want *different* things, this is not an insurmountable problem. Where I come from there is a time-honored way for two men to solve just this type of problem.” Richter smiled even wider, “I’ll roshambo you for it.”

Lieb looked confused again, “Let me explain,” Richter offered helpfully. “The way it works is that you kick me in the balls as hard as you can and I kick you in the balls as hard as I can. We keep doing that until one of us can’t stand anymore. Okay?”

Lieb looked at Richter like he was insane, but then he just vomited. He barely heard Richter say, “I go first,” because his world devolved into more pain than he could have imagined. Faster than Lieb was able to follow,

Richter had kicked up into the man's crotch with all thirty-three points of his Strength. It was easy to forget just what a stat-enhanced body could do to bare flesh, but his armored foot struck as hard as a sledgehammer. The entire time the man had been waiting for Richter to arrive, the entire time he had been arrogantly throwing insults and thinking he could control the situation, he didn't know that the chaos seed had already decided upon the punishment he would enact if he found the man guilty. That was why he had put the boots on beforehand, the only instrument of his justice that he would require.

One of Lieb's testicles burst instantly under the ball-crushing force, leaving a pulped mess inside of the scrotum. The other was forced deep inside the man's body. A defensive measure to preserve a man's reproductive ability, it didn't help. The vessels supplying the small organ twisted into a condition called testicular torsion. It was a topic Richter and every other male med student learned to fear and watch out for. The lack of blood flow quickly starved the tissues of oxygen. The testicle would die inside of a man's body in under five minutes. Those five minutes, however, would be the longest of a man's life as he experienced the gradual cell death of his genitalia.

That was not the only damage Richter's brutal kick achieved. The tip of Lieb's penis was caught against his thigh, and the shearing force caused the head to sever from the root. The upward force cracked his pelvic bone,

and the blunt trauma continued up his spine, fracturing two vertebrae. It was not enough to sever Lieb's spinal cord, but his legs would not have been able to function properly even if he had weeks to recover.

Despite the massive trauma, Lieb actually remained on his feet for a few seconds. It wasn't bravado. It was an involuntary reaction. Lieb's muscles were locked into immobility as his neurons were overloaded with pain. When he finally fell, it almost looked like it was in slow motion. One leg gave out completely, but the other just shook like tapped jelly until it too failed and Lieb crumpled to the ground. He landed on his back and a quickly growing spot of red appeared on his breeches as blood spurted out of the stump of his ruined penis.

The crowd did not need to wait until Lieb fell to hear his complete and utter agony. He just began to scream. "Gwaaaaahhhh! Aaaaaaahhhhhh! Aaaaieeeeeee!"

All levity left Richter's face as he looked down at one more vanquished foe. His gaze was utterly without mercy or empathy. It was with a cold and calculated stare that he realized Lieb was bleeding out too quickly. Richter's hand wove in a dual spellform, and he cast *Weak Stabilize*. The low ranked spell couldn't fix all the damage, but he didn't want it to. He just needed the man to live a few more minutes. Lieb continued his high-pitched screams on the ground and blood kept trickling

from his torn member. Richter turned his back on him and walked over to Paulen. Quietly, almost softly, he asked, “Would you like to ask Gila for her forgiveness now?”

The second man looked at Richter and then at Lieb screaming on the ground. The man’s legs were kicking spasmodically and he had both hands cupped over his privates in a useless attempt to stop further attacks. As if there was any more damage that could be done. Lieb’s wretched wailing continued, and his fellow rapist looked at Richter with a vain hope on his face, “I do! I do, my lord!” He raised his bound hands to grab the chaos seed’s hand, and kissed where a lord’s signet ring would normally be, “Thank you, my lord. PLEASE let me apologize!”

Richter pulled his hand back in disgust. The man turned his attention to Gila, who was still hiding in the crowd.

“I am so sorry. It was not my idea, I swear it. I... I had to! Lieb said he would kill me if I didn’t help. I liked your brother. Truly, I did! If you would only give me another chance, I promise I will never harm you again.” He turned his face back towards Richter, “I will serve you, my lord. I am a hard worker. I will prove it! Just, just please do not do *that* to me!” he furtively glanced over at Lieb, who was still wailing on the ground. A red puddle several feet in diameter had formed under the man.

“Do you accept his apology, Gila?” Richter asked.

The battered woman looked first at the man begging for mercy and then at Richter. She had lost perhaps her only family and had been brutalized by the two men on the stage. Something feral made its way into her eyes when she answered, “No.”

“I wouldn’t either,” Richter said grimly. “Bring him,” the chaos seed said pointing to the pleading man.

The man started wailing, “No! Nooooo! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry. Pleassee. It wasn’t my idea. No!”

Caulder gagged the man and forced him to his knees near the front of the stage. It didn’t stop him from continuing to plead for his life, but in Richter’s opinion it was an improvement. The chaos seed walked to the front of the stage and addressed everyone present.

“These two creatures,” Richter spoke vehemently, “have violated the body of a woman under my protection. They have taken the life of a man who was under my protection. I will ask once, and only once: are there any here who would speak on behalf of these men? Do so now, because you will never get another chance.”

Silence reigned in the crowd. Some of the freed prisoners looked pleased. Many of the men looked appalled. More than a few looked at him

in fear, but everyone held their peace. No one spoke up for Paulen softly sobbing on the ground, wrapped in his own personal hell. The only sounds were the wailing of Lieb, the choked begging of his accomplice, and a stiff wind that had begun to blow with the promise of storms to come.

Richter walked over to Lieb. He hadn't been sure exactly what would happen when he used all of his strength to send his armored foot hurtling towards the rapist's unprotected genitalia, but he knew it would be bad. This was worse. The man still had a bleeding status that was quickly sapping his remaining health. Must have severed the pudendal artery, Richter thought distantly.

The chaos seed leaned over him and spoke with deadly intensity, but in a voice loud enough for all to hear, he said, "You're not done yet, you piece of shit." Then, to the surprise of all, Richter started casting. Gold light surrounded his hands as he cast *Weak Slow Heal* and *Minor Slow Heal*. The cooldown had not elapsed on *Weak Stabilize*, but a thought to Alma got her to cast the spell on the screaming man again. The heal spells worked in conjunction and Lieb's health began rising. The spell did almost nothing to alleviate the pain the rapist was feeling though, a fact that Richter quite enjoyed.

Richter looked back out at the crowd, "Rape and murder will not be tolerated in my lands! Look at him. Look!" he commanded in a thundering

voice. The people, villagers and freed captives alike, did as they were told, though many had to turn away from the horrible tableau only moments later. A few vomited and tears ran down many of their faces. “See what will happen if you think you can simply take from those who are not as strong as you. Anyone here that thinks they are a wolf among sheep, take a look at me! You may be a beast, but I am a fucking nightmare!” His voice deepened without conscious thought, and it seemed to many that something dark and horrible was speaking from inside of Richter, “I will devour you.”

Richter grabbed Paulen by the front of the shirt lifting him up slightly. Then he began to punch him in the face. The first punch broke his nose, the next dislocated his jaw and the third fractured the eye socket and detached the man’s retina. The rapist descended two more levels into his own personal hell. Blubbering snot mixed with blood began to fill Paulen’s lungs. With a sneer, Richter looked at the blood on his split knuckles and wiped it on the man’s shirt.

The chaos seed dropped him and straightened up. He looked around at his people again. “You have a simple choice. You can stand with me and grow in power. More importantly, you can make your life and power mean something. Or...” he pointed the sniveling wretch at his feet, “you can stand against me and the ideals that the Mist Village embodies, and you will be brought low. Either way, you will still serve this village.”

Richter summoned two mist workers. The level eight humanoids coalesced into being, standing cold and emotionless. He gave an order to one of them and pointed at Lieb, "Pick that man up and do not let him escape." The construct did as it was bid. Even if the rapist had been at full health he might not have been able to resist the prodigious strength of the summoned creature. Mist workers were slow and plodding and so were practically useless in a fight. In terms of raw Strength however, they were impressive. Lieb blubbered in the worker's grey arms like an abandoned baby. No fight remained in the man.

Richter accessed his interface, adding the man to a short list of people. A Mark appeared on the condemned man's chest. Then he looked at the other rapist. Paulen had finally screamed himself out. Blood and drool ran down his chin from the left side of his ruined mouth, and his eyes pleaded for mercy. He found none. Richter gave him access to the Dungeon as well, and had the other mist worker pick him up. Neither men received immunity from the *Doubt* debuff.

The chaos seed looked back out at the crowd, "Hear my judgment," he boomed. "I, Lord Richter of the Mist Village, by right of my Mastery of this Place of Power and the covenant I have made with the people who reside here, do pass the following judgement. For the crimes of rape and murder within my domain, I hereby sentence these two men to death," he paused

poignantly, “by Dungeon.” Paulen started screaming anew through his gag. Lieb just lay on his back, trapped in a world of pain. Richter ignored both of them. He had weighed the pros and cons of declaring the Dungeon’s existence, but keeping it secret was impossible. The villagers already knew and the freed captives had transported with the damned thing. The meant they probably all knew. If some of them decided to leave the village and spread that information, so be it. Richter was beginning to realize that the time for hiding had passed.

That was a concern for another time though. There was still work to be done. “They shall be thrown inside to feed the creatures that dwell within. More than that, their names are never to be uttered again within my domain. If you must speak of them, simply call them ‘the forsaken.’”

A distant crack of thunder accompanied his pronouncement. Richter looked up towards the heavens, wondering if the Universe itself was agreeing with his decree or perhaps levying judgement against him in turn. Richter had well learned the power of words in The Land, but he had not spoken idly. Anyone who betrayed his hospitality and trust would suffer.

Though he had taken some small enjoyment from the pain of the two rapists, he was now sickened by the entire affair. With a dismissive tone and an errant wave of his hand, Richter gave a command. “Take them to the Dungeon and throw them through the portal.” The stress of the situation

affected Richter more than he knew, and his stress level was rising high. Some of the guards did not move as quickly as he wanted. His next word cracked like a whip, “Now!”

Some of the guards had been staring at their lord in shocked immobility. The unfettered violence and rage had shaken them. The snap in his voice, however, shook them out of their torpor. The mist workers were already leaving the stage. Caulder barked an order and a strike squad accompanied the constructs and their burdens away from the stage. The villagers they had to pass through parted before them. Just before they had left earshot, the second man must have worked his gag partially free. Some of the villagers could still hear him clearly despite his ruined mouth, “Pbwease. Pwbwease don kil mi!”

If Richter heard, he gave no sign of mercy or remorse, neither for condemning the two men to death or the pain he had extracted from them before his pronouncement. He just pointed to the other twelve men and women awaiting trial, “Bring them here.” His voice was detached, merely a craftsman moving onto the next task to be completed. All twelve of the remaining accused shared one emotion and one thought. The emotion was fear. The thought: that their lives had been better under the goblins, before they were “rescued” by the remorseless demon who now held their lives in his hands.

CHAPTER 41 – Day 143 – Kuborn 33, 0 AoC



Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in Unarmed Combat. +4% to unarmed combat damage. +0.2 to natural armor.

Congratulations! You have reached subskill level 2 in Pressure Points. +4% to spotting pressure points. +4% to magnitude of effect.

Richter read and then dismissed the prompts he had earned from his punishment of the two men. He absently noted that he had been neglecting this area of his training. The bonus to natural armor, meaning his skin, was enough of a motivation by itself to level his Unarmed Combat skill. With clinical detachment, he resolved to make it a priority in the near future.

His mind was wrenched from consideration of his skills by that strange feeling again, like when he was about to enter the Dungeon. It vanished before he could pinpoint a direction. Richter looked across the

crowd, but didn't see anything new. He turned his attention to the accused. All twelve of the remaining men and women had been brought onto the stage. They were not kneeling. Instead, they faced the crowd in a semicircle, with Richter in the epicenter, the conductor for the performance that was about to ensue.

Richter went through the same process as before. He announced to the crowd what these twelve men and women were accused of doing. Then he went down the line, one at a time, and asked how they responded to the charges. All of them showed some degree of fear, but the answers varied. Some merely stared back, others sobbed, and some loudly protested their innocence. One man looked like he was about to confess, but a quick elbow from the woman to his right silenced him.

None of that mattered. What was important to Richter was that the forms of justice were being followed. This entire trial was a tool he was using. It was to establish to all present that his village was a lawful place. He had already decided what he was going to do before the "trial" started. While the accused spoke, the other freed captives grumbled and a few called out from the crowd in the same choruses as before.

"Liars!"

"Murderers!"

“Traitors!”

The passion of the crowd did not reach the nearly “mob” level of before so Richter felt no need to curtail their emotions. If these twelve people were guilty of the crimes they were accused of, then they deserved far worse than a few angry shouts. Once the last woman had had her say, Richter asked again, “Will anyone here speak on their behalf?”

Unsurprisingly, no one raised their voice. He looked at Hisako to see if the Hearth Mother had anything to add, but she just gazed levelly back, neither encouraging nor condemning. That banished his last bit of self-doubt.

Richter turned to the twelve and raised his voice. “I, Lord Richter of the Mist Village, by right of my Mastery of this Place of Power and the covenant I have made with the people who reside here, do pass the following judgement. None of you are my subjects, nor have you, to my knowledge, performed acts within my domain that merit punishment. If what is said about you is true, however, you have broken basic laws of decency.” There were calls of agreement from the other freed slaves. Richter let it go on for about half a minute before raising a hand for quiet.

“Despite this, and despite the hundreds who seem to be speaking against you, I will not sentence anyone to death or other severe punishments

based solely on the words of others without proof.” More rumblings came from the former slaves. “But,” he stated sharply, raising his voice, “I also will not ignore the accusations of so many. So, you will be given a choice.”

Richter looked around at the twelve accused sympathizers, his gaze steely and implacable, “My truthsayer, Sumiko, will return from her Trial soon. Anyone that wishes to prove their innocence will be kept in comfortable confinement until then. After she proves the truth of your words one way or another, you will be freed, or disciplined, accordingly. That is the first option.”

More than a few looked off in the direction the two rapists had been carried away in. There was no question what the consequence would be if they were found guilty of rape or murder. They all stayed quiet to hear the other options. “Two, you may admit guilt now. I will take your willingness to confess into account.” Still silence reigned. “Three, my guards will escort you to the edge of my domain. Make no mistake, if you choose this option you will be forever banished from my lands. If you are ever found here in the future, you will be killed on sight.”

No one spoke until one man, the one that had caused the largest uproar from the other freed slaves when he had proclaimed his innocence, protested, “Travel through the Forest of Nadria is a death sentence!”

Another spat, “How would we even get through these cursed mists.”

Richter barely noticed the defensive enchantment anymore because of his immunity. It was just a faint haziness that followed the circular boundary. To them though, he knew it must almost seem like the world ended in a wall of swirling white. This was something he had already taken into account, however. “You will be led away from the village by my guards. After an hour, I will give you immunity to the mists for five hours. That should be enough to get you safely to the boundaries of my realm.”

“What if we cannot move fast enough?” one woman asked.

“Then you will die.” Richter might as well have been discussing the price of bread. “If you try to return to the village, you will be killed. If you meander, you will still be in the mists when your immunity expires, and the monsters of my domain will feed upon you. I am not without sympathy, however. If you choose exile, you will each be given provisions to sustain you and daggers to protect yourselves. The kingdom of Yves is two weeks travel west. You will be able to make your own way from there.”

More of the twelve began to object so Richter just raised his voice and said, “Remember that you may avoid the dangers of the forest by simply waiting to speak with my truthsayer.” He made eye contact with each of the men and women, but few could even keep his gaze.

To the last man and woman, they all chose the third option. Richter told Caulder to prepare a contingent of guards to escort them away from the village. He wanted them gone within the quarter hour. The sergeant marched off to do just that. Once they had departed, amid cursing and weak promises of retribution, Richter addressed everyone else gathered. “My villagers. I am sorry that you had to witness this ugliness. Please go on about your day, safe in the knowledge that any who harm us will suffer ten times over. We leave within the week for battle. Go prepare.” His villagers filed away.

He also spoke to the freed captives who had just watched the punishment of the men and women who had made their horror-filled lives even more unbearable. “To the rest of you, I will say the same thing I said last night. If my truthsayer tells me you are not a danger to this village, you are welcome to stay. If you do, I will never give you false promises. I will not promise your safety or your success. What I do promise is that come what may, I will stand with you. I promise that as I rise, you will rise with me. Now please, find what comfort you can in that, and go with my hope that you will now rest easier than you could before. Your children will be returned to you within the hour. I appreciate your understanding in that I did not want them to witness what just happened.”

Everyone began to disperse. Terrod posted guards around the cleared

area that the freed prisoners could easily move about in, an area now much smaller than the night before. Richter walked up to Gila and, as softly as he could manage, apologized for the loss of her brother. He asked his name and found out that the brave young man had been called Yowic. She mumbled a thank you and retreated to be with the rest of the former captives.

Richter felt emotionally exhausted, but he knew it still wasn't done. He had a short but intense conversation with Alma. The dragonling mentally voiced her assent and assurances before launching from his shoulders and flying west.

Hisako walked up to him before he left the stage. Without preamble, she said, "You are a hard man, Lord Richter."

"I did what needed to be done," he responded firmly. That was his initial intention anyway. After he spoke, even he noticed his voice was aggressive and defensive.

"I do not judge you," she told him in a level voice. "We will both need to be strong to face what is coming." She turned and strode away with Yoshi in tow. Before the sword adept had taken two steps, he stopped and nodded once to Richter. It was the acknowledgement of one hard man to another, and it somehow made the chaos seed feel better. He was not as unyielding as he wanted his people to believe. He did not regret the deaths of

the two rapists, or any of his other decisions. In his heart he knew they were necessary, but his hands were starting to shake now with repressed emotions and stress. Still, it felt good to have the respect of the adept, a man that he in turn respected.

Richter left the stage. Despite everything that had happened, it didn't change the fact that there was still so much work to do. Randolphus followed him, "Where are you headed now, my lord?"

"I will do some more enchanting before we go into the Dungeon today. The way I'm feeling, I think hitting monsters very hard with sharp objects will do me good, but first I want some time to myself. I still feel like garbage from what I was drinking last night. That," he waved behind him, "did not improve my mood." His tone made it clear that he did not want to gab and share his feelings, but Randolphus still followed silently behind. Just before they got to the smithy, Richter turned to his Chamberlain, his Companion, the Spy, and asked, "What is it that you need to say?"

"I agree with your punishment of the first two men. It is good to make an example in a way that others will remember. You are also to be commended for showing mercy to the other twelve. It will endear you even further to your people."

Randolphus stopped speaking, but in a way that it was obvious he had

more to say. “Spit it out,” Richter said quietly. He didn’t even have the emotional wherewithal to be irritated that Randy hadn’t finished his thought.

The chamberlain continued, unperturbed. After nearly a century of serving different rulers, he was well used to the variable natures of those in power. “I believe the twelve that you freed are a danger to us, my lord. It is my belief that they were rightly accused and were informers for the goblins. Such people are inherently untrustworthy. They do not know much, but what they do know about the village is enough to bring death to our doorstep. If they come into contact with one of our enemies in Yves, the village could be put in further jeopardy. Even their knowledge of the Dungeon would be enough for a noble to march an army here. We are only two weeks’ journey from my former country, even less by boat. As we have already learned, the mists are not a perfect defense.”

Randolphus paused momentarily, but then continued without prompting, “You said that you wanted my honest counsel, my lord. I believe letting these people live is a mistake. That error is compounded by then letting them go free. Most will probably die in the forest, but if even one makes it to civilization, it could spell catastrophe. I understand your desire for fairness and justice, but I would suggest that the appearance of justice will suffice in this case. If you will permit me, I can follow the guards unseen and

handle this problem. As far as any in the village will ever know, the twelve will just have left. The villagers will still believe your anger is tempered with mercy, and the danger will have been removed.”

Richter looked at his chamberlain. The Spy wasn’t being overly cryptic and... he was a Spy. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to get what he was saying. Randolphus was making excellent points while showing that he fully understood what Richter’s motivations and goals had been in the trial. Despite all of that, Richter shook his head.

“I do appreciate your counsel, Randolphus. You know that I respect you, but I do not want you to follow them. I have already dispatched Alma to monitor their progress. They will not be a danger to us.”

The chamberlain’s face tightened momentarily with indecision. He was a consummate professional, and noble by birth and rearing, if not by title. As such, he followed propriety almost to a fault. In this case though, where the lives of everyone in the village could be put in jeopardy, he decided to abandon protocol and push the issue. “My lord, I did not mean that they would pose an immediate danger by returning to the village, I meant that they could tell others important information about our village. Despite the mists, they have seen many things. The only danger is not from Yves. They could be captured by bugbears, goblins or kobolds once night falls. You stole something of immense power from the Ash Stalker Clan. They are

one of the largest goblin clans in the entire River Peninsula. They number in the tens of thousands, if not the hundreds of thousands. I could never get accurate reports and the goblins are prolific breeders. The green-skins are a naturally divisive people, but for the affront of taking the Bloodstone, they would unite and wash over this village in a wave of blood and blades. Again, my lord, I urge you. Let me deal with this threat.”

Randolphus’ face was earnest and concerned. It was obvious to Richter that the chamberlain was doing his best to serve. Richter cared about ceremony and propriety not at all, but even if he did, the genuine entreaty in the chamberlain’s face would have caused him to forgive his Companion.

The chaos seed placed one hand on the Spy’s shoulder. With patient sincerity, Richter repeated, “You do not need to do anything, Alma is watching them.” He did not expect Randolphus to stop though. It was written all over the man’s face that he would try to change Richter’s mind again.

As predicted, the chamberlain tried to convince his liege again, “Please reconsider, my lord. The poison fruit from today’s decision may not ripen for weeks or months, but it could be enough to kill us all. If you worry about dirtying my hands, I promise you, the few cups of blood I spill this day is nothing compared to the red seas that I have swum through in my past.”

Richter stared at the man. Not because the argument had swayed him one way or another, but because Randolphus still had not shared many details of his life in Yves. Spymaster for the court of Yves meant he had probably been involved in all manner of sins, but this was the first time the Spy had admitted to being an assassin as well. Richter wasn't overly bothered by this, but it was a good reminder of just how dangerous the man standing before him truly was.

Richter listened to his chamberlain with an open mind and without interruption. He heard everything the man had to say. When the Spy finished speaking for the third time, he merely looked him in the eye and then repeated slowly, in a voice heavy with meaning, "It is not necessary. Alma is watching them. She will remove any threat that they might pose, now, or in the future."

Randolphus looked back, confused, then his eyes widened in understanding. He looked at Richter as if seeing him for the first time. The chamberlain remembered that the dragonling had left as soon as the judgment had been passed. That meant, if he understood correctly, that Richter had already seen the danger the twelve posed.

More than that, his liege had already found a solution that both kept the people of the village believing in his mercy and removed the threat. Even as he ordered the prisoners escorted out of the village for their "safety," he

had ordered the bloody actions necessary to safeguard his people's lives.

Randolphus' respect for Richer grew. It was rare to find an honorable ruler who also understood that honor was a luxury one could not always afford. Randolphus bowed deeply, "My lord is most wise. If you say there is no cause for concern, I will, of course, trust your judgment. By your leave, I shall go see about my duties."

Richter nodded back and entered the forge to begin enchanting. It was with a bit of surprise that he received a series of prompts.

Kindness and mercy are not the only virtues in The Land. Strength and decisiveness are also to be treasured. By identifying and dealing with a threat quietly, you have shown your chamberlain that you understand the demands of power. The Spy's estimation of you has improved.

*You have gained +3,549 Relationship Points with **Ran'dolphinius**. Total Relationship Points: +35,244.*

*Congratulations! Your relationship with Ran'dolphinius has improved from **Steadfast (+20,000)** to **Trusted (+35,000)**. "Your word is enough for me."*

The effect of these relationships never ceased to amaze him. He thought about all the other people like himself, gamers who might have been transported to this world. Most gamers were only as loyal as their options and placed little stock in connections with others. Even more were

antisocial. Anyone like that would most likely have a very difficult time making their way through The Land.

Richter turned his attention back to the matter at hand: enchanting. He didn't want a repeat of the exploding mace. He avoided any dual enchantments. Even as he practiced his Profession, part of his attention was focused on the visual feed he was getting from Alma. Through his familiar's eyes, he watched the banished men and women walk away from the village. This went on until they had gone three-quarters of a mile, nearly to the limit of Richter's ability to communicate with the dragonling. Then he sent her a command. Alma carried out his order and descended. She sent a one-word command psychically to Caulder. The sergeant nodded, knowing the communication actually came from Richter. He laid down daggers and provisions for the twelve exiles. Then he and the guards headed back to the village double-time.

The twelve stayed where they were standing, unable to see more than a few feet. Richter gave each of them immunity to the mists, and less than a minute later they had claimed the weapons and provisions and were on their way. The twelve decided to stay together for safety and they headed unerringly west. Alma flew high above them, her dark body completely unseen against the dark canopy and storm-filled sky.

Richter kept watching through Alma's eyes until she passed beyond

their maximum range of fifteen hundred yards. He continued enchanting and smithing, doing his best to prepare his people for the battle to come. After about an hour had passed, he walked out of the Forge and looked west. Rain had begun to fall. This close to the mountains, it was cold and hard, even in summer. He took several slow, deep breaths, feeling the essence of life falling from above, then he began to do what was needed. One by one, he removed immunity from the twelve. It was only minutes later that the first prompt appeared.

*You have been awarded **3,148** experience (base 71,959 x 0.07 x 1.25 x 0.5) from Brain Drain against **Level 12 Wood Elf**.*

*XP deficit remaining: **-167,654***

Minutes later, there was another.

*You have been awarded **1,889** experience (base 43,168 x 0.07 x 1.25 x 0.5) from Brain Drain against **Level 10 Human**.*

*XP deficit remaining: **-165,765***

He counted the lives extinguished, one after another. Rain washed down his face. The smiths watched him stand in the downpour that came heavier and heavier. Some thought to try and bring him under cover, but he was their lord, and they trusted that he would do whatever he needed to do.

Richter stood, silent witness to the passing of twelve people he had

ordered Alma to murder, until the twelfth prompt appeared.

*You have been awarded **2,644** experience (base 60,437 x 0.07 x 1.25 x 0.5)
from Brain Drain against **Level 11 Dwarf**.*

*XP deficit remaining: **-142,228***

He heaved a heavy sigh.

It was done.

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*Know This! You have given your first **Judgement** of a crime since becoming leader of your village. This action has unlocked a new City Mechanic, **Corruption**, and a new City Dynamic, **Crime**. These two factors work in conjunction but are not interchangeable. Unresolved Crimes will increase the Corruption of your settlement, decreasing Production, Commerce, Morale and other factors. Corruption is not always a negative thing. Remember that it can open unique possibilities.*

*Know This! You are blessed with a population that believes in the rule of law. The baseline Corruption rank of your settlement is **decent (rank 3, -1,000)**. At this rank, your settlement earns a base bonus +3 Diplomacy Points per day with other civilizations that possess a negative Corruption Rank. Build a Townhall or Constabulary for greater information about the Corruption of your village. “Your people generally tend to not only follow the law, but take pride in treating others as they would like to be treated.”*

-30% to current Crime Points.

*Lack of a **Townhall** causes complete loss of any gained Diplomacy Points.*

Know This! Your decision to mislead your village about murdering twelve people was efficient but could have far-reaching consequences if the knowledge becomes widespread. Never forget, your actions have consequences.

Richter already knew that he had played a dangerous game misleading his people. Still, he stood by his decision. Sentencing the two men to death had been easily defensible and justified. The deaths of the other twelve, though he did not doubt their guilt, would have been harder for his villagers to swallow, though the freed prisoners most likely would not have objected. He pushed the matter out of his head. What was done was done. Besides, there were notifications to be read.

A new status screen appeared in front of Richter. It showed a timeline and the word “Corruption” floated above it. Much like the tick marks that appeared on the Loyalty and Morale windows, there were words associated with each rank: *incorruptible, virtuous, moral, ethical, honorable, decent, obedient, compliant, neutral, noncompliant, disobedient, selfish, dishonorable, shameful, corrupt, lawless, and ungovernable*. The “*decent*” tick was glowing.

Next to the timeline was a barely-filled bar with the word “Crime” floating above it. There were tick marks on this vertical graph as well: *negligible, petty, nuisance, problematic, pervasive, widespread, rampant, unchecked, kleptarchy*. The biggest distinction Richter had seen between Mechanics - e.g. Morale, Loyalty, Health and now Corruption - and Dynamics - e.g. Crime, Productivity, Research and Population Growth - was that Mechanics seemed to affect Dynamics. Increasing Morale would boost Productivity, the Fighting Spirit of the village and Population Growth. He was sure there was more to it, but that was all he had discovered so far. It was yet one more reminder that there was still so much more that Richter needed to learn about The Land. He turned his attention back to the prompts awaiting him.

*Know This! The amount of **Crime** generated by various actions depends on countless factors, including Population Size, History of Crime in your settlement, History of that particular Crime, existing governments, etc. A rape and murder are serious crimes and have substantially increased the Crime in your current settlement. Your response was swift and brutal, ameliorating much of the negative effects of these heinous events. The results are as follows.*

*Murder: **+1000 Crime Points***

*Rape: **+1000 Crime Points***

Prompt Trial, Confession and Execution of Perpetrators: -1950 Crime Points.

Total Crime Points: +35 (base +50 x [100-30% Corruption modifier])

DONG!

*Crime Rank of Mist Village has fallen from utopian (rank 0) to negligible (rank 1). Utopian ideals can only exist when no one is aware of them. You may never return to a utopian level of Crime at the current evolution of your people. Crime can affect all facets of your civilization. The effects are far-reaching and may never be completely known, but the following changes are immediate and immutable: at negligible rank, -2% **Morale** penalty, -2% **Productivity** penalty, and -2% **Commerce** penalty. “Some crimes may happen in your settlement, but overall, you have a very safe society.”*

Richter read the prompts three times. There wasn't that much information to absorb, but there were nuances that he was already picking up on. It was ridiculous to think that he could have a crime-free society. That was against human nature. It also probably went against elf, dwarf and gnome nature too. He couldn't really complain about having a *negligible* rank in Crime, and the fact that his people were *decent* overall was something to be thankful for.

The line about Corruption opening ‘unique possibilities’ made him

think. He'd heard the argument back on Earth that crime actually stimulated economies in some ways. It had sounded like total horseshit at first, but then he realized that it depended on what the definition of a crime was and which society you were talking about. Few would argue that smuggling innocents out of countries hellbent on their destruction was a bad thing, though based on that government's laws, it would be considered a crime.

There were also plenty of examples in history where "crime" had been a necessary component of a civilization. In the United States' past, it had been a "crime" to help slaves escape to the north. In many other countries, it had been a "crime" to speak out against tyranny. In Richter's opinion, if you lived in an unjust society, the only true "crime" was standing by and doing nothing. The point was, crime could affect a society in many ways, including acting as a catalyst for social change. When he'd been a gamer, Richter had often found opportunities associated with thieves' guilds and black markets.

Another city mechanic prompt appeared.

*You have already been made aware of the City Mechanic, **Commerce**. No further information is available. Build a Market to learn more.*

Richter shook his head. Again and again, the growth of his village was being stymied by a lack of infrastructure. Roswan needed to get his butt

back pronto! If there was anyone else that could build good quality buildings, Richter would have offered them anything they wanted. The mustached elf was the only person in the village with a *journeyman* rank in Construction though. The next most qualified person was a builder gnome who was only a level eleven *initiate*, two full ranks lower. Roswan would most likely be able to do amazing things when he came back as a Professional Builder, Engineer, or whatever the hell Profession he got, but in the meantime his absence was really cramping Richter's style!

Unfortunately, Hisako wasn't any help in this particular case. Sprites grew their buildings from specialized trees using a subskill of Herb Lore called Living Sculpture. Whether by design, fate, or racial weakness, there was almost no one born with the Construction skill in the Hearth Mother's population. In fact, there was exactly one sprite in her entire settlement who had *journeyman* rank in Construction.

Hisako had already sent for him with one of her magical message acorns. A trade treaty she had signed with the Mist Village required her to provide four *journeymen* of various skills. Unfortunately, the sprite lived another day and a half south of the Hearth Tree. That, and the fact that he was over one hundred and forty years old, meant he wouldn't be getting here quickly. She assured Richter that he was not decrepit by any means. Sprites had a lifespan of about two hundred and fifty years apparently, but he still

wasn't exactly spry. Bottom line, it would be days before the sprite arrived at the village.

Sighing once more, Richter dealt with the remaining prompts.

Know This! Every action you take causes ripples throughout your village and through time. Your Judgement of the two rapists and twelve informers has affected the Morale and Loyalty of your village.

-103 Morale Points for the brutal justice you delivered in front of your people. Many understand and even support your decision, but the loss of their idyllic existence has saddened them.

Base Morale: +1192 x 25% Undefeated x 9% Administrator x 10% Health x -2% Crime

Total Morale Points: +1,693

His people didn't like what he'd done, but it wasn't enough to change their overall feelings about him, apparently. His settlement was still rank three in Morale, *elated*. It gave a +20% boost to Productivity, Fighting Spirit and Population Growth. That made him feel a bit better about his decision. The bonuses that came from having such a high Morale were needed now more than ever. He needed his village to be productive, and soon his soldiers would need to battle for their very lives. Having a boost to their Fighting Spirit would be clutch.

He had already noticed that the Productivity bonus was manifesting in the Forge. His smiths were making weapons and armor faster than they should be able to, something he was extremely grateful for. Even apart from making new enchanted items, major damage had been done to the arms and armor of his people during the raid on the goblin encampment. The smiths were working diligently to fix rents in chainmail and smooth notches in blades. If his forces went back into battle with low durability gear, the swords would cause less harm and the shields would block less damage.

There was still so much to do before the attack on the undead lair that sometimes Richter worried there might not be enough time. Now it appeared that Crime was reducing the village's Productivity. He sighed. At the end of the day, he wouldn't have done anything differently. What he had done had needed to be done.

As if to give credence to his thoughts, or at the very least to tell him to stop whining, his next notification showed that it was never all bad.

+54 Loyalty Points for how you dealt with a threat to your people. The Land is a place of hard realities, where few live to old age. You have conducted what most who observed it considered to be a fair trial. The strength you have shown has deepened the trust your people have in you. Lead well, Master of the Mist Village.

Base: **+1565** x +25% Undeclared x +9% Administrator x +10% Health

Total Loyalty Points: **+2252**

It appeared that even though his villagers didn't like his show of justice, they stood behind it. The fact that the Morale had dipped while the village's Loyalty went up was a bit frustrating though. Richter experienced the same irritation that all leaders experienced at one point in time, whether they be a general or a parent. He had to accept the reality that what his people needed would not always be the same as what they wanted.

There was an unfortunate and immediate side effect of his decision to murder the banished men and women. One that he hadn't foreseen, but proved there were always consequences to one's decisions. Richter truly hoped it was not an omen of worse things to come.

*Know This! You have acted in a dishonorable fashion. For good or ill you have misled your people. Due to this you have lost your Tenet: **Honorable Ruler I.***

In time, through your actions you may requalify for this Tenet, but let this be a lesson to you. Do not follow a path that is not true to your nature, even if the rewards seem tempting in the short term. There will always be a consequence for this in the end. Be true to yourself.

-100 Loyalty Points for betraying the principles of your Tenet: **Honorable**

Ruler I

Base: **+1465** x +25% Undeclared x +9% Administrator x +10% Health

Total Loyalty Points: **+2110**

A rebuke from the Universe itself did not feel good. Richter stopped processing his prompts for a moment to reflect on that. Only for a moment though. He wasn't one to second guess himself. His reasons were still valid and he stood by them. The loss of Loyalty was a bit of a hit, but only a bit of one. Richter nodded his head. If this was the consequence, then he could live with this. The next notifications made him feel a bit better.

Know This! There is a one week penalty for losing your Tenet, but once this moratorium has passed, you may choose another. If you wish, you may choose that Tenet now and it will be instituted in seven days.

*A **Tenet** is achieved when a preset series of conditions are met. The Tenet will provide certain qualities or privileges to your settlement. At the current level of your village, you may have one Tenet. At the next level, you may have two Tenets. All previous Tenets can be replaced at the time of the village leveling.*

The current Tenets you have available are:

Don't Mess with the Mist I. *You have been attacked, and taught those fools a serious lesson. Specifically, less than 10% of those who started the attack*

lived to see another day. Defense +10% in future attacks, small chance of future attackers acquiring 'Fear' status when faced with your merciless forces.

Enchanting Times I. *Your village has enchanted many powerful artifacts. Specifically, you enchanted more than 1,000 items in a single month. +10% Enchanting Strength and +10% Soul Points per captured soul.*

Experienced Dungeoneer I. *You have founded a Dungeon on your Settlement. +10% Experience gained from Dungeon- and Labyrinth-related sources. +10% Dungeon Points.*

*Would you like to assign a **Tenet** now? If you do not, then one will be randomly assigned in one week. Yes or No?*

Richter weighed the options, but only one of the choices was really jumping out at him. The +10% defense was tempting, as was the *Fear* status. It wasn't a proactive choice though. The enchanting tenet was also a plus, but Richter could honestly mimic those effects through his Profession. It was *Experienced Dungeoneer I* that caught his eye. Not wasting further time on deliberation, he chose.

Your Tenet will be assigned in one week's time. Do not betray your Tenet again or the consequences could be dire.

There was one more prompt awaiting him, and to Richter's delight, it

was a quest.

You have been offered a Quest: **Code of Laws I**

Your settlement is growing and Crime has inevitably wormed its way into your forest village. Your people need guidance and a clear set of laws.

The time has come to create the rules that your people will live by. The Mist Village could be a beacon for law and justice, or a wretched hive of scum and villainy. Be warned, choosing laws that are incongruent with your populace may lead to unrest and further Crime and Corruption.

Success Conditions: Create a Code of Laws for your people

Reward: Decreased Crime and Corruption. Settlement bonus for having a Code of Laws.

Penalty for Failure or Rejection of Quest: A worsening of the Corruption and Crime in your settlement.

Timeframe: One month. Failure to complete this quest within the allotted time will cause worsening of Corruption and Crime in your settlement and possibly other consequences.

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Richter had never really gotten a quest that was so clearly screaming,

“Take this seriously!” He didn’t even know why he was being given a choice. He chose “Yes,” and closed the prompt.

He rubbed his eyes, looking around the Forge. When he had woken up that morning in the aftermath of a fivesome, he hadn’t thought he would be condemning some of the very people he had just saved to death. As the dwarf and human smiths worked around him, he searched his feelings. Did he feel remorse for their deaths? Was there some nagging doubt inside of him regarding his choices? Did he even regret the loss of life?

“Are you well, my lord?” one of the smiths called out, seeing the searching look on his face.

Richter looked at the dwarf, and a large, genuine smile broke out over his face, “I feel good. Let’s enchant some shit.”

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The two men were thrown through the portal into the Dungeon. Lieb lay on the ground, a fresh scream coming from his raw throat as he fell to the ground. Paulen immediately turned around and tried to go back through the shimmering energy field. What he did not know, what Richter had only just found out himself, was that the chaos seed's Mastery of the Dungeon was nuanced. The two rapists had been given access to the Dungeon, but they did not have permission to leave. The portal Paulen beat against was as unyielding as stone.

A howl made him whip his head around. Red light peeked around red columns, and the sounds of movement could be heard. Paulen looked down at Lieb, who had heard exactly the same things. The castrated man called out weakly, "Please."

All Paulen could do was sneer. He had raped that girl and done many other terrible things, but it was nothing compared to what he had seen Lieb

do countless times. Now the man that he had feared for so long was whining and crying on the ground like so many of their victims. He made eye contact and spoke the true words of his heart. “I hope they take their time when they eat you.” Then he took off at a run.

Paulen stayed along the side of the cavern. Thirty seconds later, the screams began. Lieb cried out in pain and wailed for his mother. The sound of snuffling was punctuated by the crack of bone. There were more screams, and then the sounds of animals feeding. Tears ran down Paulen’s cheeks as he ran. He knew he had wished for Lieb to suffer only a minute before, but the cries of agony and the loud, wet eating sounds were worse than he could have imagined. He wasn’t feeling any actual sympathy, but he couldn’t help but think that the same thing was about to happen to him.

The bestial sounds he had left behind with his mad dash began to get louder. Tears flowing even faster, Paulen tried to move more quickly through the gloom of the cavern. He tripped over a fold in the ground, sprawling hard. A ragged “Nooo,” ripped its way from his throat when the snuffling and baying grew louder. He scrambled back onto his feet and kept running.

His heart thudded in his chest as he continued to feel his way around the edge of the cavern. Then his worst fear came true: the sounds of beasts echoed from in front of him as well as behind. He stopped running for a

moment, sobbing, his head darting around like prey, then realized there was a patch of blackness darker than the rest. It was a tunnel.

Paulen took off again, rushing down the tunnel. The cries of beasts continued to spur him forward. He kept running as fast as he could. He careened into walls, losing blood on the rough rock, doing anything he could for just one more minute of life. The snarls continued to echo behind him and he ran ever deeper into the Dungeon. An errant thought occurred to him that he should have died already. It was like he was being driven forward, but why would the monsters do that? With that thought rattling around his brain, his head struck a low hanging shelf of stone. He fell to the ground, stunned.

He lay on his back blinking. He had lost the light of the central chamber a minute before. Paulen lay alone in the black, utterly bereft. It took his addled mind a few moments to realize that it was quiet. The snarls, grunts, and howls had faded away, leaving nothing but silence.

For a man that had resigned himself to experiencing a quick but horrible death, the waiting was worse.

Paulen's breath sounded harsh in his own ears. Blood continued to trickle down from a scalp wound that had opened when he bashed his head into the rock. It was hot and thick on his skin, filling his nose with the scent

of warm metal. If he could smell it, what else could smell him? Fear blossomed in his heart again, and he stood up hurriedly, looking around.

He couldn't see anything.

Every direction was the same as another. Striking his head on the low ceiling had removed any sense of orientation. The only other sound besides his short, panicky breathing was the thudding of his heart. Both hands extended out in front of him, he blindly reached for a wall.

Shhhht.

The dry scraping sound came from somewhere to his left. Paulen spun, eyes searching the blackness. Rationality had long since fled. "Who is that? Hello?" He paused. Fresh tears started flowing down face. "Please," he sobbed into the stillness of the Dungeon.

There was no other sound for long minutes. The flow from his head wound had made a thick paste on the left side of his face. His tears mixed with the red sludge and brought the taste of his own blood into his mouth. Paulen had remained still since he'd heard the noise, but enough time passed that he convinced himself it had only been his imagination. If he just kept going he could find another way out. He was not going to die here!

A hiss sounded only inches from his face.

The man whose name had been stricken had time to whisper one

word, “Mama,” and wet himself, before a powerful set of reptilian jaws crushed his left shoulder. He let loose a scream that became a blood curdling yowl when the monster ripped his arm clear from his body.

Great gouts of blood shot over the ground and walls, immediately consumed by the greedy Dungeon. The blood was not powerful enough to trigger a new ability in the Dungeon, but it was still gratefully accepted. The man fell down, eyes wide in shock, but it took too long for his body’s reflex mechanism to set in. If he had lost consciousness, he would have been lucky enough to miss the faint grinding of bones that heralded the Chaotic reptile unhinging its jaw. He could have avoided the warm, wet feeling of a giant snake’s maw swallowing his head. Soon, it was quiet in the Dungeon once more. Not because Paulen had stopped screaming, but because the sounds couldn’t escape the Harbinger’s gullet.

The Dungeon feasted. The soul energies of the men were satisfying on a level that it had never imagined. Absorbing the bodies of the koran tusker and jenit prowler had sped its growth, but the taste of it was like comparing a draught of stale water to a glass of chilled white wine. The nuances in the energy were fascinating, and the Dungeon now intrinsically understood part of its own nature. It had to consume!

The infusion of energy was instinctually routed into areas consistent with its Motivations. More monsters were grown, a lair was developed, its

tunnel system grew more extensive, loot and resources were generated; all done with the singular dominant purpose of luring more food into its depths.

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While the story of the forsaken men came to an end, Richter enchanted weapons and armor. In three hours he was able to complete two more dual enchantments. After asking someone to time him, he learned that it wasn't just his imagination that dual enchantments took longer to create. While solo enchantments normally only took a minute or less, his dual enchantments could take up to thirty minutes depending on the enchantments being combined. Richter hadn't yet found a way to predict how long it would take. Time-consuming or not, he was making serious progress on his new Profession quest.

Quest Update: **The Power of Two I**

Dual enchantments created: 8/10

Seeing his progress made the stupid quest name more bearable.

Richter already had plans for the Talent Points he would earn from the quest and planned to finish tomorrow. He also gained another 1% progression towards his next skill level in Enchanting by creating the dual enchantments. He had to pay close attention each time, but it really wasn't too different than working with power tools. If you knew what you were doing and paid attention, you shouldn't be in too much danger. Even if you had been working with a power saw for ten years though, one moment of inattention could turn you into a left hand jacker for the rest of your life. Of course, the upside to that scenario was that fisting suddenly got a lot more polite.

There was another awesome perk to the difficulty of creating dual enchantments. Namely that his rank progressions for the various enchantments he knew had skyrocketed in the past two days.

*Congratulations! You have unlocked Rank III of the enchantment: **Life Defense, Level I.***

*Congratulations! You have unlocked Rank II of the enchantment: **Durability, Level I.***

*Congratulations! You have unlocked Rank IV of the enchantment: **Sonic Damage, Level II.***

*Congratulations! You have unlocked Rank II of the enchantment: **Ignore Defense, Level I.***

For the first time, Richter was making serious progress in his Profession. It was with great surprise that he realized his Limitless ability might actually have been working against him. Having a high affinity had let him progress in his skill ranks quickly, but it also made whatever he did come relatively easily. It was pretty clear now that to advance his skills he needed to push himself. His 100% affinity in Enchanting meant that lower level enchantments came too easily. That had stalled his skill progression. As dual enchantments required him to pay exponentially more attention, he was finally getting some traction!

He was also happy to see that the village hunters and Hisako's sprites were already putting the *Soul Trap* arrows to good use. They came to the Forge periodically to drop off soul stones glowing with captured spirits. The smiths, in turn, were making high steel arrows as quickly as possible.

As happy as he was with the progress, Richter couldn't spend his whole day in the Forge. There were practical matters that also required his attention. When he was done, he whistled for Alma. She had returned from her murderous task some time ago, much to his relief. He had been waiting to ask her a very important question.

After her safety, Richter's biggest concern was over the warning he'd received about possible consequences if his people found out about the executions. If one of the hunters stumbled across the bodies, it could lead to

serious problems. When he had asked her about the remains, the dragonling had just licked his cheek and told him not to worry. She had already thought about how that could be a problem and had summoned mist workers. In her travels she had found a monster's nest. There was a cave with freshly gnawed bones scattered in front of it. There were also furrows in the ground to indicate clawed animals had taken up residence inside.

The constructs had been ordered to drag the bodies to the cave. Whatever dwelt within would dispose of the evidence. Richter had been flooded with affection and appreciation for his deadly little familiar. She told him that she had considered burying the bodies, but feeding them to the forest creatures seemed like a better option. He was struck by just how diabolical his little predator could be. She really was his soul familiar.

Richter made a note to send Terrod with no less than two strike teams to examine the den. He wouldn't do it for a few days though, more than enough time for the monsters to do their thing. At that point, any evidence should be destroyed. He thanked his familiar for her actions and her information. Monster nests were nothing to be trifled with and he planned for the strike teams to be kitted out with enchanted gear and potions. After battling the assengai spiders, Richter had learned the folly of letting monsters proliferate unchecked in his lands.

After the debrief, Alma had taken up residence in front of a nearby

hearth while he enchanted, enjoying the heat. At his call though, she launched into the air before settling right back down on his shoulders. In what had become a customary exchange, Richter thought to her affectionately, **Lazy thing.**

She just yawned expansively in response and squirmed slightly to get more comfortable atop her perch. Richter walked over to the elementum chest and removed several items. They went into his bag, and he left the Forge. The dwarves said they would continue working around the clock and would be ready for him to enchant more items in the morning.

Richter had sent a mental call to Futen before he left the smithy. The remnant floated up not long after.

“My lord?” the remnant asked.

“Do me a favor and say, ‘You rang’ from now on, okay?” Richter said with a faint smile.

The orb just pulsed while it floated in the air.

“Well... give it a try.” Richter ordered, enjoying messing with the monotone nightlight.

The remnant didn’t sigh, but Richter felt like there was an unvoiced one as the orb just continued to float along. After a few seconds though, Futen said, “You rang?”

It was spot-on Lurch.

Yes! Richter felt supreme vindication. Nailed it. After he'd had his fun, he sent the orb to fetch his Companions to meet him by the village gate in half an hour. There were other stops he needed to make first. Richter jogged to the Quickening.

"Elora," he called out once he was beneath the white and silver boughs of the celestial tree.

The pixie children called out to Alma, but she was not in the mood for a game of chase. They all started whining, a multicolored cloud that spun above Richter's head. Their mother shooed them away and came to hover in front of the chaos seed. She curtsied in midair.

"How may I serve you, Lord Richter?" Her voice was as musical as ever.

Richter smiled at the small queen. Then asked his question, "Is there a way to harvest some leaves or branches without causing damage?" As he had been walking to this corner of the meadow, it occurred to him that he had never seen any broken branches or fallen leaves around the silver tree. Even in summer, other trees had deadfall around them, but the Quickening was a tree from a higher realm. By the same token, he was positive that coming anywhere near the tree with an axe would cause both the pixies and the

sprites to abandon him as allies. Not that he would ever do such a thing anyway.

He also knew that the pixies sometimes made clothes from the Quickening's leaves though. They had to have a way to harvest at least the velvety white foliage.

Elora's face grew quite serious, "Asking a pixie for clippings from her tree is a very intimate thing, my lord. Asking for clippings from a celestial tree, even more so. Though you are my lord, I must ask why."

Richter nodded slowly to show he took her words to heart. He wasn't bothered in the slightest by her question. Though he was indeed lord of these lands, he was not so arrogant as to think that he had full control or even extensive understanding of the powerful forces it contained. The Quickening, the Core buildings, the Dungeon, and the very magics that made up his Place of Power tapped into energies he had the barest control over. Pixies were, by their very nature, tied to trees, and no creature in existence had a closer bond to the Quickening than Elora. When she gave a warning, he wisely listened.

He told her about the Dungeon and also about the Well of Offering. Richter spoke of his hope that the celestial nature of the Quickening might mix with the Dungeon and perhaps temper the Blood and Chaotic magic.

There was a small nagging part of him that remembered Hisako's first warning to him: mixing magics was dangerous. He ignored it though. The Land was a dangerous world. The only way to be truly safe was to have the strength to meet whatever came. That meant taking chances. He ended with, "I don't know if placing celestial components from the Quickening would do anything, but I want to try. I know your bonded tree is precious, however, and would not do anything to jeopardize it or our Companionship."

She listened to him, with a grave expression on her youthful and tiny face. It might have been comical, but Richter knew what she had been through. He was speaking to a queen that had watched every member of her race perish and then had been the vessel of rebirth of every pixie now alive. After he was done speaking, she simply hovered there for a moment before calling up into the tree in pixiespeak. A moment later, two of her children flew down with a single white leaf.

"I can give you this leaf freely, my lord," Elora told him. "I must speak with the Quickening to ascertain if any more is possible, however. Please return tomorrow."

"Speak to the tree?" Richter asked. The other two pixies handed him the leaf, reverent, their heads bowed. Seeing the solemnity in the normally mischievous children's faces really drove home what a gift he was being given.

“Yes,” Elora responded with no further elaboration. “I will need to meditate first. I wish you well and I will see you on the morrow, my lord.” She flew up into the boughs and disappeared.

Well, Richter thought, it wasn’t a “no.” He would just come back tomorrow. Richter examined the leaf in his hand. It had a velvety texture on top that was as white as cream. The bottom was silver and reflective. It was smooth like actual metal, but was slightly warm in his hand. When he tried to learn more though, he got a surprise.

*Your **Herb Lore** skill is insufficient to discover information about this celestial object.*

That was the first time he had been shown that particular prompt. It was especially surprising because he was skill level forty in Herb Lore, almost a *journeyman*. Five more skill levels and he’d be eligible to become a Professed Herbalist. Just how much stronger and more powerful were celestial objects than those native to his plane? Another thought occurred to him that wasn’t nearly as warm and cuddly. How balefully powerful would demonic creatures be in comparison to what he had already fought against? Taking the thought even further, what did it mean that an imp was the first creature he’d met in The Land?

Richter shook his head. Those thoughts were just one more rabbit

hole he refused to get sucked down into. He decided to stretch his legs a bit to warm up. He didn't want his muscles to be tight from the cold rain that was still falling. His fingers twisted into the spellform *Weak Haste* and he took off. His stats already made him fleet of foot, but the extra +10% speed boost made even his easy jog more like the lope of a deer. Alma jumped off his shoulders and glided above him, though she complained about being wet the whole time. In scant minutes, he was back at the Dragon's Cauldron. After picking up a few supplies, Richter headed back down the hill from the meadow.

The villagers that he passed nodded to him, and a few smiled, but many were still reeling from the trial. He nodded back, but didn't stop. Richter's destination was the vault. The customary guards posted in the catacombs snapped to attention and saluted as he passed. He crossed over the Great Seal and went down the tunnel to the treasury.

The door to the vault was solid titan steel. It would take a ridiculous amount of force to enter without the key. Luckily, he was the key. There was a clear circle built into the door. The first time he had approached, holding his Mark of the Mist Village had been all that was required for it to recognize his Mastery of this Place of Power. The thick bolts that kept others out had drawn back and it had opened on its own power. Even that was no longer necessary. They retracted as he approached simply in response to his

will.

When the thick door swung open, he was greeted with the sight of an octagonal room filled with shelves. They were still more than half empty, but there was much more in the chamber than when he had initially claimed the Mist Village. Large sacks of crystal rested on the shelves. The Tefonim jewelry and other items he had collected also resided on stone panels. Richter put several items into his Bag of Holding while removing a few in turn.

When he was done, he started jogging back up the tunnel. The treasury door clanged shut behind him, and the bolts secured themselves once more. Richter left the catacombs and made his way to the main gate. Sion, Terrod and Randolphus were waiting for him as expected. Sapir flitted about in the air near his meitu'meidon. There were others there though that Richter had not expected to see. Hisako, Yoshi and Beyan were waiting with his Companions.

“Hello,” Richter greeted them.

“Well met, Lord Richter,” Hisako replied. “I have been told you intend to enter the Dungeon again. Yoshi and I would like to join you.”

“And you?” the chaos seed asked his Death mage.

“When I saw such august personages gathering at the gate, I assumed

there would be something of importance occurring. I did not know you were planning a Dungeon dive, but I am excited to enter! I thought you might need the help of my pet,” the gnome replied with a smile, “and I would not mind some more experience and raw materials for my work.”

Richter knew exactly what Beyan meant. The Death mage liked to experiment with dead bodies using his magic. That particular practice was an extremely sore topic between Sumiko and the gnome, seeing as how she was a Life master. He looked at Hisako to see if she had similar objections.

The wise sprite leader understood the unspoken question. She had known Sumiko for nearly a century. Hisako just smiled wryly, “I have seen many things in my long life. While I once had an aversion to Death magic like Sumiko, I grew out of it long ago. It is only because of her youth that she has not already done the same.”

Youth, Richter asked himself. Sumiko wasn't bed bound with arthritis, but she had used a cane before bonding with her pixie. The meidon ritual had given her renewed youth and vitality, and by his estimations she was now somewhere between a MILF and a GILF, but she still had nowhere near the youthful appearance of the red-headed Hearth Mother. Just how old was Hisako if she was calling Sumiko young?

The sprite leader guessed his thoughts again. This time with a feral

smile, she told him, “Ask at your own risk.”

Richter decided not to ask. He still had no idea what that “unknown spell” was that she had cast on him the other day. There was a problem though. “This is going to put us over the five-man strike squad. Randolphus said that there could be some serious consequences for that once we are in the Dungeon.”

“I have already thought of this,” Hisako answered. “Your Companionship with my son has many benefits. It is possible that increasing the party size in a Dungeon is among them. One of the older texts I have read speaks of this. Better to test this theory now than when you finally enter the Labyrinth.”

If she was right, then Terrod, Sion, Randolphus and himself would all count as only one party member. That meant there would be more than enough room. He didn’t see any downside to trying and she was right. Better to test things out while the Dungeon was weak and low level, than to wait for later. He wondered if the decaemur knight would count as a party member or just as Beyan’s pet. He hated running an experiment with two unknowns, but he hated sitting around with his thumb up his ass more. They would just see what happens.

Richter clapped his hands together with a smile and rubbed them

vigorously, “Well, here we go killing again!”

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Richter had everyone cluster close about him and he cast *Dungeon Transport*. Tendrils of mist rose into being, creating a grey sphere ten feet in diameter with him in the center. The cast time was long, eight seconds to be exact, but by the ninth, they all stood before the snake's head entrance of the Dungeon. As soon as they materialized, the chaos seed felt that strange tingling sensation again. It faded away in a few seconds, but it reminded him of how he'd felt the same during the trial. He was left wondering if the Dungeon was already tunneling under the village.

The spell could have taken them right to the Entrance Chamber, but Richter wanted everyone to get the full experience. Put another way, he wanted to see them freaked out a bit.

He started forward, but Hisako touched his arm. She glanced at the faces of Yoshi and Beyan. The evidence was easier to read on the gnome, but even Yoshi was clearly discomforted. That was going just as planned,

but he had forgotten about the strike team Randolphus had assigned to guard the place. They all clapped their fists to their hearts in salute when they saw their lord, but every one of the men and women looked seriously stressed! Doing a mental forehead slap, he accessed the Dungeon interface and en masse gave every guard in the village immunity to the *Doubt* debuff. While he was at it, he gave Yoshi and Beyan immunity and access to the Dungeon as well. With that done, the party walked through the snake's mouth.

Before long, they were standing in the Entrance Chamber. Randolphus told Hisako, Yoshi and Beyan about what they had seen before on the other side of the energy field. He also started giving an abridged answer to the necromancer's pointed and overly-direct questions about why the proper chamberlain was now kitted out as a rogue.

While they did that, Richter dropped the items he had collected down the Well of Offering. He tried to ignore the part of his mind that screamed "Noooo" as he literally threw items worth thousands of gold down a hole in a ground.

Item Accepted. Dungeon Resource now includes: Xanthite.

The xanthite was a relatively cheap resource, but in their remote location, the supplies of the powdery rock were limited. It was what allowed steel to be changed into high steel. As long as the iron mine didn't run out of

ore and they had enough xanthite, the lowest metal the village would have to work with would be high steel.

Richter added more items. From the earlier prompts, two things had become clear. One, the potential of his baby Dungeon was limitless. Two, he had to grow his boy up if he wanted to really get the best stuff. The encouragement he'd been getting from Hisako and Randolphus to make it stronger was finally starting to make sense to him. Stronger meant more dangerous, but it also meant more growth, more Rooms, and better loot. He added more items.

A silvery potion came out of his bag, and he sighed deeply before dropping it into the well.

*Item Accepted! Dungeon Loot and Resources now includes: **Potion of Selak's Luck.***

That one was especially hard to let go of. Richter had been through hell and high water to get the components for the potion. He only had six left. There were enough shiverleaf fronds, the main ingredient of the potion, to make more, but it was an extremely difficult solution to create. Even if everything went great, it took Tabia at least four solid days to produce it. There just hadn't been enough time to make more of the silvery potion considering the fact that battles were continuously consuming health, mana

and stamina potions at an insane rate. Tabia could only do so much in a day, and supplying his people with what they needed to level and stay safe took precedence. The luck potions were an extravagance until the village stockpiles of red, blue and green potions were replenished.

He dropped more items inside.

Item Accepted! Dungeon Loot now includes: Tefonim Silver Ring (masterwork).

Know This! Silver rings are now included in Dungeon Loot, but the specific qualities of Tefonim jewelry cannot be replicated without the appropriate Room and a Jeweler of requisite skill and knowledge. The imprint of Tefonim Silver Ring (masterwork) will be recorded in case the prerequisites are ever met.

Richter blinked. He had to read it again. It looked like not only did Tefonim jewelry require an unidentified Room, but it also needed a Professional Jeweler to work in the Dungeon. Did that mean this could be a safe place for someone to live? Maybe even a population of people that could work to make it stronger? Now *that* was an interesting idea.

He dropped in more herbs and seeds, some of which were *scarce* or *rare* in quality. Many of the sprites that had bonded with the pixies had brought powerful plants as tribute and gifts. Sprites viewed plants the way

others viewed family heirlooms. The plant clippings and saplings they had gifted to the village represented wealth in their culture. Richter hoped they thrived in the Dungeon. Some of the herbs had truly remarkable properties.

The last plant he dropped in was the Quickening leaf. When it disappeared down the well, there was a faint rumbling that vibrated the ground under everyone's feet.

*Item Accepted! This item can be used as both Resource and Catalyst: **Leaf of the Quickening.***

HISSSSS!

Congratulations, Dungeon Master! You have uncovered a Motivation of your Dungeon: **Limitless Power**. Your Mastery of this Dungeon will open doors of great power for you, but never forget, doors swing both ways. The Dungeon of Bloody Chaos may consume objects of refined magic. The Quickening leaf just provided is a pure example of celestial power, though only a modicum of heavenly spark existed within it. Continue to add more items of pure magic to your Dungeon to give it access to these Powers.

Progress to awakening Celestial Magic in your Dungeon:

0.3/10,000,000

He'd found another Motivation! His Mark of the Adventurer didn't seem to have evolved this time, but he supposed he hadn't exactly fulfilled the conditions yet. Richter was about to open his mouth to share the information, but another prompt appeared.

You have been offered a Quest: **Limitless Power I**

You have discovered that your Dungeon is capable of manifesting every type of Power. The cost for this is extremely high, but has unlimited potential. Will you unlock another Power in the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos?

Reward: Unknown

Penalty for Failure or Rejection of Quest: None

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Richter greedily accepted the quest. The Dungeon would be pursuing this end anyway, and as its Master, wouldn't it behoove him to fulfill its Motivations? He prepared himself to share the information he'd gained, but then he hesitated. Richter had always been one to believe in signs. Maybe the quest prompt had come up, interrupting him last time, for a reason. The

first advice he'd been given upon arriving in The Land was to be careful who he told about his Limitless ability. Xuetrix had warned him that many people would destroy him utterly for fear of what he could one day become. If they felt that way about a mere human with his ability, how would they feel about a whole Dungeon?

Hisako had been ready to destroy the Dungeon when she found out about the Bloodstone being used as the Item of Power. Randolphus still had a secret that he wasn't willing to share. Even Beyan had been gripped by a near-obsession recently to master more Death magic. What would the gnome do if he knew the Dungeon could become a factory for Death creatures?

The chaos seed examined the prompt again, and didn't see anything that would affect anyone in the attack squad directly. He decided to keep the information to himself. The real question was, what was a "catalyst?" Unfortunately, asking that would mean revealing the new Motivation. The other question was, if a leaf was only worth 0.0000003% of the total celestial power needed, just what would he need to sacrifice to awaken the power fully?

Richter thought about it a moment, and then something else occurred to him. He might have one more item of "refined" magic. He looked at his Bag of Holding, considering. He hadn't been planning to drop the next item in. It was literally worth someone's life, but now that he knew about the new

Limitless Power Motivation, it seemed like it might be worth the cost. So that Hisako wouldn't see, he surreptitiously removed a rebirth root. The glowing gold strand had been harvested from beneath the Hearth Tree, and though small was a vital spell component in a resurrection spell.

The spell could only be cast by a Life master, someone who had reached skill level one hundred in Life magic, and it had to be cast quickly after death. His own Life Mastery from his Place of Power didn't make him eligible. A "master" was someone who had reached skill level one hundred in a skill. A "Master" had claimed a Place of Power and fulfilled the requirements to utilize those Powers. Needing such a *rare* herb and requiring one of the few people who had mastered Life magic made resurrection something to which almost no one would have access.

Richter *did* have the roots though, and both Hisako and Sumiko *were* Life masters, which meant he could bring five people back to life so long as he revived them in time. Dropping the root down the hole was almost like throwing away the life of a loved one. He had previously weighed the risks and benefits of the Dungeon being able to recreate the magical root, but had still decided against it. Now, things were different. If Richter could make the Dungeon embody Life magic in the same way it embodied Blood and Chaos magic... that might be worth losing 20% of the village's resurrection potential. That might be worth a single life.

The glowing root quickly disappeared down the black hole of the well.

*Item Accepted! This item can be used as both Resource and Catalyst:
Rebirth Root of the Hearth Tree.*

The root is a pure expression of **Life Magic**.

Know This! Being on a Life ley line reduces the requirements to awaken Life magic in your Dungeon by 100x.

Progress to awakening Life Magic in your Dungeon: 50/1,000.

Richter read the prompts closely. His decision to sacrifice the root was already paying off. These latest notifications had provided him with a great deal more information than he'd had before. First, that it required less to awaken a Basic Element than Celestial magic: one hundred thousand points vs ten million. He couldn't even imagine where he was going to find that much celestial material, seeing as how the Quickening wasn't a viable option. He would probably have to shove the whole trunk down the hole. Even outside of the fact that it would be an insane waste, Richter could never harm the blessed tree.

The one hundred thousand points of concentrated magic required to

awaken a Basic Element was much more doable. Adding the fact that the four elements that comprised his Place of Power - Water, Air, Dark and Life - cost 100x less meant that it was a much more accomplishable goal. He just hoped he hadn't made a mistake that would haunt him in the days to come.

He finally got to the last item he planned to add. Richter stared at the vial of black liquid and hoped he wasn't making a mistake. Sion was already bitching that he was taking too long though, so Richter just went with his previous reasoning. 'This might work out well or go horribly wrong, but either way, it would probably be cool.'

*Item Accepted! This item can be used as both Loot and Resource: **Blood of the Dark Aberration.***

HISSSSS!

*Dungeon Ability Added! **Consume:** Higher level monsters in your Dungeon have a very small chance to absorb the traits, abilities and/or properties of other creatures they consume. These new monsters can pass their powers on to their offspring or be recreated by the Dungeon.*

Quest Update: **The Power of Blood I**

Bring the blood of five powerful creatures to your Dungeon to accelerate

its evolution.

Current Count: 2/5.

Despite the fact that Richter had dropped the blood in, he still cringed slightly. The searing pain he'd experienced when his Mark of the Adventurer had changed had not been fun! This time, thank Abrams and Whedon, was different! There was no pain.

The **Symbiosis Boon** of your Mark of the Adventurer may now access the perk gained from the blood of the Dark Aberration: **Siphon**. You may now absorb residual energy from the bodies of enemies that you have killed. You must be in physical contact. This will add 10% of one of a creature's attributes to you. Effects last one day and cannot be ended early. Each creature consumed requires that 50 mana from your mana pool be devoted to maintaining these stats. This mana will not regenerate until the energy is released.

Whaaaatttt! This was amazing! He hoped he didn't have to do something nasty like eat a slime monster or something to "absorb" the energy, but even if he did, it probably wouldn't be the worst thing he'd ever

put in his mouth. The time limit wasn't as good as... no time limit, but it was still awesome. An extra five points of Strength or Constitution was well worth decreasing his mana pool by fifty points in a fight! There had to be a downside, because this Symbiosis Boon was just too awesome!

Then he read the next prompt. And there it is, he thought sourly.

Know This! The **Symbiosis Boon** can only use one blood type at a time. In the future, these may be exchanged by physically touching the Well of Offering, but switching blood types will remove any active effects gained while using the old blood type. Which blood perk do you choose?

Deadly Charisma: +2500 Relationship Points with any sentient dead, undead, or living dead. +10% Relationship Points with any sentient dead, undead, or living dead.

Siphon: Add 10% of a slain creature's attributes to your own at a cost of 50 points of your mana pool.

Still awesome, Richter thought, and the fact that he could switch by touching the Well of Offering was cool. In fact, it looked like he had already found a loophole in the fact that he had to wait a full day for his mana to

return. He could just switch blood types and restore his magic pool if needed. With a faint smile on his face, he chose “Siphon.”

A strange and tingling warmth permeated his entire body.

“Are you done yet?” Sion asked.

Richter looked at him and made some creepy eye contact, “Oooohhh yeaaaahhhh.”

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Richter handed out Potions of Clarity.

Randolphus spoke up, “The Dungeon is young and so shouldn’t be a significant danger to a group such as ours. At least at the beginning. That is still no reason not to take the danger seriously. I have known high level adventurers to fall and never rise even on the highest levels of a dungeon that they had spent years adventuring in. I also do not know if the loophole of being Richter’s Companions will allow for us to dungeon dive without repercussions. If the Dungeon reacts negatively, it will attack our party with everything it has.”

Everyone nodded in understanding and acceptance. Richter took the lead and entered the portal. The room looked much the same as last time. Dark red columns still obscured their view, though there was plenty of space to pass between them. The same diffuse red glow came from in front of them, and occasional animal noises split the silence. There was an almost

oppressive feel in the air.

“Huh,” Richter commented softly, looking around.

“What is it?” Sion asked at the same volume.

“The bodies of the two men I condemned. I thought we’d find their remains.”

Randolphus poked his head over Richter’s shoulder and said, “The Dungeon is always hungry.”

Gahhhh, Richter shouted in his own mind. Randy was so friggin quiet, that he was barely able to keep the surprised shout inside. The chaos seed seriously considered enacting the “bell around the neck” protocol for the Spy, but the bastard could probably travel silently even wearing bells with a vibrate enchantment. Hmmm, vibrate enchantment... Suddenly, Richter was distracted by the Mist Village’s newest export idea. Nobody went to Brookstone for a “massager.”

Sion elbowed him in the ribs when he saw his friend was staring off into space again. The chaos seed came back to himself and motioned for everyone to position themselves for battle. This was, of course, unnecessary because they were all waiting on him. Still, he enjoyed making special forces hand gestures in combat situations. Everybody did.

Terrod hefted his new high steel buckler with +2 *Defense* and his

high steel sword of *Sonic Damage*. Neither weapon was the best Richter could make, but they were still powerful. Bowdin was working on a blade made specifically for the captain. He assured Richter that the final weapon would have requirements within Terrod's capabilities, and that it would be ready before the army left to battle the lich.

Yoshi stood beside him, and the decaemur knight rounded out the tank roles in the party. Sion stood with an arrow knocked and Randolphus stealthed into the darkness. Hisako began casting a spell. Light surrounded her hands. The illumination made Richter realize that the mist lights he had summoned last time were gone. Apparently, the Dungeon would consume anything left behind, he thought sourly. The Hearth Mother finished her casting.

A bowling ball-sized sphere of white light flew from her fingertips. It shot between two of the dark red columns. Once it had passed them, the ball split into three copies of itself. One remained at the spot where it had multiplied and the other two flew off in different directions. Each of those passed between a different set of columns. They split again and again and again. In the space of thirty seconds, the entire cavern was well lit by hanging orbs of white light.

Without the gloom, the entire foreboding vibe of the Dungeon faded away. Richter looked around for his chamberlain to see if his stealth had

been broken, but either the man was hidden behind a pillar or his skill was advanced enough that he could hide even in full light. Then the chaos seed looked at Hisako. The fact that he was impressed was written all over his face. The Light Master, who was most likely centuries old, just smirked and cocked her head as if to say, “I’m nice like that.”

With those preparations complete, Richter employed the same plan as last time. Alma flew into the air and began to scout. He reminded her again to be wary in case there were aerial predators. She sent back the mental equivalent of a sniff of disdain.

And you should remember not to trip over your feet, master. she thought to him.

Richter chuckled. He guessed he could be like a mother hen to her. The chaos seed pulled out his Traveler’s Map and made it show a live feed of what Alma was seeing. Hisako leaned over the map as well.

Once again, the dragonling flew in concentric circles. This time she started seeing monsters further from the red center of the room, and there was more than just one type. The koran tuskers still rooted around in the grass, but there was a second type of monster that slunk around as well. They were about three feet at the shoulder and had the build of greyhounds. Their fur was green in color. They were sleek creatures that picked up and placed their

feet down carefully. They were moving slowly, but even from Alma's aerial view, they gave the impression of a coiled spring. Richter had no doubt these creatures could launch themselves forward at great speed. Their heads seemed overly large for their bodies, and a long tail whipped behind them, bending like a cat's. Three thick claws curved downward on each paw.

The two types of monsters seemed to more or less ignore one another. Alma did see a bit of conflict when one of the porcine tuskers got too close to one of the new beasts. The dog monster snapped at it, and it looked like the jaws actually extended outside of the large head. The monster's incisors were four to five inches long, and the rest of its mouth was filled with sharp teeth. At this display of dominance, the tusker squealed in panic and ran back to the safety of four others of its kind. The hound ignored it after that. Richter continued to watch and saw that while the tuskers normally seemed to cluster together, the new creatures were solitary and dotted the cavern. Strangely, there seemed to be baby pig monsters mixed in with the other tuskers this time.

"Jenit prowlers," Hisako stated quietly upon seeing them in the map. "They have little in the way of natural armor, but are incredibly fast. Their necks and jaws can elongate slightly to ensure that they bite their prey. Their claws are also strong enough to score sprite armor."

Richter looked at her in concern, "What about enhanced sprite

armor?” The question could also have been, ‘What about my shit?’

The Hearth Mother just smiled at him. She had that same slightly insane look in her eye that Sion had when going into battle, “You will probably be fine.”

“Super helpful,” he told her sarcastically. She nodded back happily and Sion snickered from off to the side.

Alma had finished her scouting of the cavern. Most of the monsters were still clustered in the center under the large red jewel. The problem was that there were about 50% more tuskers than last time and about thirty of the jenit prowlers.

“There are more monsters than I expected,” Randolphus said, phasing into view. The problem was, he phased in directly behind Richter.

The chaos seed had to stifle yet another startled gasp. Giving away their position to the Dungeon monsters with a ladylike shriek would not have been the best. Richter gritted his teeth instead, “Do not sneak up on me.”

Randolphus looked back and answered in his most polished and arrogant voice, “You do realize you just said that to a Rogue, correct, my lord?”

Richter rolled his eyes, “Why do you say there are too many monsters?”

“Not ‘too many’,” the Spy corrected in his cultured voice, “merely more than I expected. Your Dungeon is only several days old and we killed many monsters yesterday. Dungeons have amazing powers, but even they are limited in what they can create. Each day, the Dungeon generates a finite amount of power, called Dungeon Points. These are used to fuel everything that the Dungeon does, including creating monsters.”

“So?” Richter asked. “It used Dungeon Points to make more monsters.”

“That is possible,” Randolphus admitted, “but I adventured in another young Dungeon, barely two centuries in age, and I have read of many more.”

Two hundred years? That was young? Richter asked himself, but he didn’t interrupt.

“When I say that the Dungeon uses its Points for everything, I mean everything, my lord,” the chamberlain continued. “Creating new rooms, spawning monsters, generating treasure to draw us in, growing minerals and anything else it might do. Young Dungeons typically cannot generate large volumes of monsters all at once. They focus on growth and leveling.”

“If a Dungeon uses all its Points to make monsters all of the time, then it’s neglecting its own growth?” Richter asked. He was finally getting what Randy was trying to say. If the Dungeon Points could be used to level

the Dungeon up, it would be a waste to stay at level one and just keep making weak monsters.

“Yes, my lord. I recognize, however, that I have never been in a Dungeon that utilized a Deeper Magic, let alone a Higher Energy. The amount of Dungeon Points it can create each day is quite high, so this could explain why it was able to regenerate so many monsters in a single day. There is also another, simpler explanation. It might have created a Lair.”

It was quiet for a few moments. I know this guy isn’t going to make me ask what a fucking Lair is, Richter thought. His expression must have reflected his inner thoughts, because Randolphus soon added, “A Lair is a Room that greatly increases the breeding rate of the Dungeon’s monsters. It would explain why there are young tuskers amidst the rest. Dungeon creatures mature at a rate dozens of times faster than their real-world counterparts. The Dungeon can also accelerate their growth for much less energy than it takes to spawn a monster from thin air. The Lust ability you told me of would also make this more likely.”

Richter nodded. The Crypt Mistress ichor had given a bonus to the Dungeon, making Lairs 10% more likely to develop. He hadn’t known exactly what that meant at the time, but it made sense. It also increased the monster spawn rate by the same amount. There was another possible reason for the large number of monsters that Randy hadn’t mentioned yet.

Turning to Hisako, he asked, “Could my Life Mastery or the Quickening be at play here?” The bonus he received from having claimed Mastery of the Life ley line increased the growth of the physical manifestation of his village by 30%. The Quickening increased the yield of all resources by 25%.

Hisako stopped to consider the question academically. Her mind quickly shifted to the potential dangers of a Bloodstone Dungeon boosted by Celestial magic. Her heart started beating rapidly as she considered it, but she willed herself to calm. Lord Richter was an agent of change, that had been clear almost from the beginning. Change could never be stopped completely, but it could be guided. As she formulated an answer, she resolved to pay close attention to both the Dungeon and her ally. The accomplished leader let no evidence of her internal thoughts play across her face.

She shook her head in response to Richter’s question, “I do not believe the Dungeon itself would be viewed as a resource. The Quickening could very well affect the growth of resources inside of it, however. As far as the bonus from your Life Mastery, I cannot say. I know of no documented Dungeons built upon a Life Place of Power.” She did not sound too sure about either supposition to the chaos seed.

It looked like Randy’s Lair idea was the best one they had. Still

though, Richter didn't get why it was important, "Okay. What you're saying makes sense, but why should we care? You keep telling me that we want the Dungeon to be stronger. More monsters sounds like a good way to accomplish that."

"Because, Lord Richter," Hisako said with an excited gleam in her eyes, "Lairs always yield better treasure, and battling Lair-spawned creatures imparts more experience than fighting regular Dungeon monsters."

"Ah," Richter said finally catching what they were throwing, "and I'm guessing Lairs also have a stronger monster that you have to overcome to clear them out?"

"They do indeed," Randolphus answered, surprised that his liege knew that detail.

Richter finally smiled. So ... a mini-boss in a Dungeon and good loot besides. The gamer inside of him was doing a dance. There was still one thing that didn't make sense to him though. "You keep saying that I need to grow the Dungeon and make it stronger, Randy. Wouldn't wiping out a Lair have the opposite effect?"

The chamberlain shook his head, and to Richter's satisfaction, he saw the man grimace slightly at the shortening of his name. It was the little things in life that made it worthwhile, in the chaos seed's mind. The Rogue

answered with his customary cultured voice, “Dungeons thrive on battle, my lord. You have already seen that it is using a second monster type today. That is most likely because we killed the tuskers yesterday. It will lose a small amount of energy when its creatures are killed, but it can gain most back by reabsorbing them. It also learns and grows by having us battle its monsters.”

It was getting stronger by observing them? Richter wasn’t a hundred percent sure that he liked the sound of that, “So the monsters will learn and adapt to our tactics?”

“Nothing quite so cerebral, my lord. Remember, while the Dungeon is alive, it is not aware in the same way that we are. Also, these beasts are not capable of intelligent planning. They will not drive us into traps, for instance. It is possible that the Dungeon will one day house creatures that are capable of tactics, but I do not believe we will have to fear that for some time to come. There is also another reason that I recommend we search for the Lair. There are certain perks that come from conquering them.”

“Alright, you’ve sold me,” Richter acceded. “Before we do anything else though, we still need to kill the monsters in this *first* room, right?” Both the chamberlain and the Hearth Mother nodded. “Then let’s get to it.”

Richter decided their best course of action was to draw the creatures

to them. Here at least they had the cavern wall at their back, limiting the directions from which the monsters could attack. “Buff up everyone.”

He summoned Alma back and psychically clued her in on the plan. *Weak Haste* increased his movement and attack speed by +10%. *Minor Chitin Carapace* increased his natural armor by +4; the Earth spell thickened his skin appreciably and made it appear glossy like a beetle’s shell. Unfortunately, the physical change meant his other Earth defense spell, *Weak Barkskin*, had no effect. He considered casting *Weak Life Armor*, but the +1 defense wouldn’t make too much of a difference. If they had been battling undead, he would have, as the defense increased to +3 vs Death creatures, but in the Dungeon he had better uses for the mana.

Taking a deep breath, Richter cast *Summon Weak Saproling* and *Summon Minor Chokespore Arachnid*. Ever since Hisako’s warning about summoning too many creatures at once, he’d been hesitant about such spells. Both creatures remained easily under his control, however. Richter made eye contact with both, creating a weak psychic bond.

The other magi in the party cast their own buffs. Hisako cast a mass Earth magic buff that reduced their stamina consumption by 20%. With all of that done, the clock was ticking until the buffs ran out. Richter cast one more spell, *Akaton Evolution*. Targeting the saproling, he used Chaos magic for the second time.

Again, he was struck by how easily his mana filled the Chaotic spellform. Undulating grey power shot towards the saproling and was absorbed into its body. It disappeared and for a moment, nothing happened.

“What was that?” Hisako spat. Richter looked at her in surprise that only deepened when he saw her face. She looked afraid.

“It was my Chaos spell,” Richter replied, at a loss. How could she have such a negative reaction to something so beautiful? He looked around at the others in the party. Except for the decaemur knight, they all looked discomfited as well. “Didn’t you think the light was beautiful?”

“It made me feel uncomfortable,” Sion replied softly. “Just like when I was in the tunnels at the goblin encampment. The light from that thing underground...” His voice trailed off. Everyone else nodded to show they felt the same. Richter remember that Sumiko had had a similar reaction when she witnessed him respawn once. He had apparently been dumped through a portal that had showed raw chaos behind it. He couldn’t argue with the unilateral reaction of his party members, but he still didn’t understand it. The light just felt *right* to him.

Before anyone could say anything else, the saproling began to change. There was a small *crack* like splitting wood as it seemed to fold in on itself. It had taken the form of a wolf made out of intertwined pale

branches. It was covered in leaves that took the place of fur. As the party watched it began to shrink. The leaves fell off and it shrank from the size of a large wolf to the size of a golden retriever. The color of the wood began to darken. After a few seconds, the transformation completed. The creature looked sleeker and more solid than before. Richter realized that despite shrinking, it hadn't lost any mass, it had just become more dense and compact. A prompt filled his vision.

*Know This! Your spell Akaton Evolution has evolved your **Saproling** into a **Hardwood Saproling**, 1 of 3 possible evolutions. Attack increased by +2. Defense increased by +5. Speed decreased by 10%. New attack unlocked: Thorn – Your summoned creature can fire hardened thorns at your enemies.*

Richter checked to ensure he still had control over the creature and was pleased to see that he did. Hisako spoke up, "I trust you, Lord Richter. Your control over this magic is discomfoting, but I accept that it is part of you." The redhead visibly shook herself, "I would ask that you limit your usage of it around me as much as possible, however."

"Fair enough," he replied.

"Then let's hunt," she told him. The look in her eyes said she was ready for violence.

He couldn't have agreed more.

CHAPTER 47 – Day 143 – Kuborn 33, 0 AoC



Alma continued to give an aerial view of what was happening. Richter sent his hardwood saproling forward and had the chokespore arachnid hide on one of the columns again. Within seconds of the earth elemental leaving his line of sight there was a piercing howl. One of the prowlers had caught sight of it. Despite the fact that The Land operated by game mechanics, there were some very big differences. One of the biggest was that enemies were not dumb mobs that you could pull one at a time. When the animal sounded the alarm, every fucking monster in the place came a'runnin!

Richter ordered the saproling to lead the monsters back towards his group. He didn't specify exactly how though. It wasn't clear who was more surprised, him or the prowler, when a three-inch-long thorn with a wickedly barbed tip shot from the saproling's mouth. The projectile stabbed into the crook of the prowler's front leg. The animal went down with a pained yelp.

It started biting at the section of wood that was still outside of its body, but the spike was embedded deeply and the barbs kept it anchored in the flesh. Richter was pretty sure that if the thorn came out, a large chunk of flesh was coming out as well. Only a minute into the fight, and his evolved creature had already taken one of the monsters out of the battle. He loved Chaos magic!

The other monsters continued to surge forward. His saproling retreated back towards the party, but it was soon overtaken. Even if the hardwood saproling hadn't had its speed reduced, it never could have outrun the prowlers. The dog monsters sank their teeth into the forest elemental, but its increased defense let it shrug off at least some of the attacks. Richter ordered it to focus most of its efforts on retreating. He needed the monsters to get closer.

Some of the approaching creatures caught sight of Richter's group and charged them instead, but the low-level monsters were easily dealt with. Sion picked one off with a moderately-imbued arrow strike. Beyan had switched the decaemur knight's weapon to a heavy two-handed spear. It skewered an approaching tusker with its undead strength, then lifted the creature off the ground before bashing it into the cavern floor again. The knight looked at the boar with dispassionate eyes and saw that it still moved. The undead raised the body and slammed it back down several more times

for good measure. Other stray monsters were dispatched by members of the group with equal efficiency. As powerful as the Dungeon might one day become, Richter's party was ridiculously overpowered for this first room.

The hardwood saproling continued its slog back towards the party. More monsters had piled on, and its health was flashing red. It finally came into view though, two prowlers with their teeth sunk into each of its forelegs. A herd of ten tuskers milled around the creature, jostling each other in an attempt to bite the forest elemental. They were crowded so close together that their hardened bone ridges dug into each other. Several were bleeding. Alma continued to fly overhead, watching the whole thing but not intervening. More monsters were running up from the far side of the cavern.

Richter watched them approach, willing the saproling to get just a little closer. It struggled to free itself and return to its master. It managed another two feet. It was enough. With a grim excitement, Richter thought, **Now!**

The chokespore arachnid followed his command without hesitation. From its perch twenty feet up a nearby column, it plummeted unseen towards the knot of monsters that was almost two dozen strong. The jumping spider landed lightly on the backs of two tuskers. It had the delicate and unnatural grace of all spiders, the lightness of step that made spiders the stuff of nightmares for so many. The boar monsters didn't even notice until the

spider released its special attack.

Richter's arachnid hunched down for just a moment before hundreds of thousands of tiny spores shot from the holes in its abdomen. Because it was higher off the ground than the monsters the effect wasn't immediate, but that served Richter's purposes as well. Nodding to Sion, the chaos seed started imbuing his shot while his friend did the same. Twin fires of blue and gold sprang into existence around their arrows.

The chaos seed had already spent nearly four hundred mana on his buffs and summoning spells, but that still left him enough to max out the secondary effects of his Enhanced Imbue Arrow skill. With Alma at level thirty-eight, there was up to an 80% chance to inflict *Mind Fog*, a 50% chance to cause *Stun* and up to a 20% chance to cause *Psi Crystallization*. The level six Psi Bond he and Alma shared gave another +12% chance to all the effects. That wasn't even counting the 38% boost to damage he got because of Alma's personal level. At a cost of two hundred mana, it wasn't something he could do again and again, and it took seven seconds to fully power up. With an AoE of six feet though, once his imbued shot was charged, it was almost fire and fa'get'about it!

While Richter imbued his shot, he also used *Analyze* on one of the prowlers.

Name: Jenit Prowler	Disposition: Angry
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Jenit prowlers are known for their cackling laugh. Though they are often heard before they attack, few prey escape. The prowlers possess a body built for prodigious speed. Their bite is also magically enhanced, allowing them to do far more damage than they could otherwise. A prowler's teeth are angled backward slightly, almost assuring massive bleeding if its victim manages to break free.

*Special Attack: **Clamping Bite** – Increases bite damage by +100%. The jaws can then clamp magically shut, ensuring they cannot be opened without massive trauma.*

Level: 14

Health: 391 **Mana:** 34 **Stamina:** 290

Strength: 12

Agility: 36

Dexterity: 37

Constitution: 35

Endurance: 29

Intelligence: 3

Wisdom: 4

Charisma: 5

Luck: 10

The creature definitely wasn't a pushover. The Dungeon's +10% health bonus was also obvious. It meant it would take more to put it down. Richter wasn't worried. Hisako could probably solo this Dungeon. Hell, Yoshi and Randolphus could probably do it as well.

Richter was just happy neither of the creatures they had encountered so far seemed to have any innate stealth abilities. The added +10% to Concealment that the Dungeon gave its monsters and traps did jack if their base value was zero. It did remind him though that somewhere in the

Dungeon there was a giant snake that had been known as the “unseen killer” *before* it had gained scales made of pure high steel and been imbued with Higher Energy magic. That was a concern for later though.

The golden glow around Richter’s arrow included black streaks after the first second that started speeding over the surface by the third. Pulling on his psychic connection with Alma made blue-white lightning dance around the aura. The black streaks stabilized to a constant level and the imbuelement took on the appearance of a barbershop pole. Gritting his teeth in a bloodthirsty smile, he shouted, “Now!”

Both he and Sion released simultaneously. By the time they were ready, the spider’s spores had taken effect. Every creature within the spider’s AoE except the saproling and the spider itself had fallen to the ground, hacking. The sprite’s blue arrow was surrounded by yellow lightning, courtesy of his meitu'pixie, Sapir. The Air pixie had transitioned to battle form while his meitu'sprite was imbuing his shot. Sapir’s wings clacked furiously as he flew above Sion in an agitated circle. Celestial or not, the pixie child always seemed hungry for battle. The bolts of blue and gold-black struck the cluster of monsters with explosive force.

The saproling’s already mauled body succumbed and the arachnid’s soft body was literally blown apart, but they had served their purpose.

Almost thirty monsters had inhaled the spider’s spores and were down on the

ground gasping before the imbued shots even struck. The two Companions' attacks created fields of overlapping force that ravaged the tuskers and prowlers.

Sprites were physically small, most three to three-and-a-half feet tall. They were excellent archers but did not have the skill and range of elvish bowmen, though Richter would never say that out loud. What truly made them dangerous was their racial skill, Imbue Arrow, which let them convert mana into explosive force. The fact that Richter was the only known non-sprite who had ever learned the skill had gone a great way towards earning their trust.

The bonuses of the skill started modestly. With a +5% increase with each skill level to both magical damage and the speed with which they could convert mana, Imbue Arrow let them bring the pain! Bonding to their pixies had evolved the skill to Enhanced Imbue Arrow and had, in effect, doubled the base damage. Sion's thirty-two skill levels in his now-evolved skill meant that the two hundred and twelve MPs he invested caused up to one hundred and ten points of damage to anything in his AoE. Combined with Richter's similar although weaker output, the monsters were turned into pieces of meat.

Ten monsters that were in the center between the two Companions' AoE died immediately. The rest lost hundreds of points of life as the force

from Richter's attack tore flesh, broke bones, and burst organs. Their *choking* status rendered them helpless, greatly increasing the damage they suffered. A cascade of prompts washed over the chaos seed, giving him up-to-date combat information.

BEGIN COMBAT LOG

Koran Tusker suffers from Mind Fog.

Jenit Prowler suffers from Psi Crystallization.

Jenit Prowler is Stunned.

Koran Tusker hit by Richter with Enhanced Imbue Arrow for varied damage. Damage Type(s): [(26.3 Physical x 76% Dex) + 76.2 Magic (Force) – 4 Armor] x 1.8 Helpless. Total Damage: 213

6-foot AoE Damage (no modifiers): 76

Richter has slain Koran Tusker!

Richter has slain Koran Tusker!

Richter has slain Jenit Prowler!

END COMBAT LOG

More and more prompts fed into Richter's subconscious mind, letting him digest the combat info and make the appropriate choices in the battle. Half the monsters were down in the opening salvo and it had only cost them two arrows and two summoned creatures. Keening and hacking screams still came from the creatures that had survived the imbued attack, and several blue-white crystals hovered by their heads. Richter could feel Alma's immediate interest in the psi crystals, though hunger might be a better word.

Later! he commanded. When he felt her resistance to the command, he added, **The sooner the battle is done, the sooner you can drain them.** She sent him a disgruntled psychic pulse in response, but it was good enough for Richter. Who wanted a woman without a lil' fire? **Then get in the fight!**

The monsters had reached his group.

Yoshi's blades wove in a graceful dance, though the damage they wrought was anything but delicate. Large rents appeared in the skin and muscle of any monster dumb enough to enter the sword adept's range. White frost crystals formed at the edges of the wounds as extra ice damage was unleashed from his blades' enchantments.

Terrod used both his sword and shield well. The captain's exposure at the birth of the Quickening had increased his affinity in Shields to 100%.

Since then, he had advanced several levels and learned a few tricks. He triggered *Bash*, knocking a jumping prowler to the ground with a large crash. His counterattack opened the dog from chest to crotch. Red blood spilled over the ground. In two seconds, the Dungeon drank most of the sanguineous fluid.

Beyan ordered his knight to defend him above all else. The undead creature jabbed at tuskers and prowlers alike, keeping them at bay while the gnome finished a Death spell. Purple-black light surrounded his hand. A second later, a laughing skull wreathed in necrotic energy shot from his hand and impacted against a tusker. The sow went down squealing while Death magic writhed over her face. In his other hand the necromancer held his Wand of Dark Bolts. Black bars of energy shot into the monsters as Beyan targeted beast after beast.

Hisako focused on Light magic during the battle. Beams of incandescent white luminescence shot from her fingertips. Some burned holes through monsters while others made them snap at illusory creatures. Still others bound the beasts into glowing cages, inflicting burn damage each second they were imprisoned. Relaxed would be the best way to describe the Master of Earth, Light and Life magic's mood. She had no wish to deprive the other party members of battle experience, though she could have cleansed the entire chamber with just one high level spell.

Randolphus phased in and out of *Stealth*. The chamberlain kept his enchanted throwing knives in their bandoliers, preferring to attack his targets from behind and from the shadows. The Rogue would appear and stab down with a heavy blade. Each attack severed spines, punctured hearts, disemboweled abdomens or created huge gaping holes that made his victims bleed out. The combination of backstab damage plus critical strikes coupled with the use of Professional Rogue attacks made the Spy a deadly foe.

Sion continued to fire arrows at approaching enemies. The columns meant he didn't have much time to identify, target and release at monsters as they raced towards them, but sprites' racial disposition channeled points into both Dexterity and Agility with each level they attained. He didn't take the time to imbue the arrows, especially with the shots fired at almost point-blank range at times, but his high level and archery skills served him well. *Drill Shot*, *Stun Shot*, and *Double Shot* drained his stamina quickly but crippled several monsters and wounded many more.

Richter shouldered his bow and drew his blades. In his left hand he clasped his Elementum Short Sword of Freezing. In the other, for the first time, he held a spiked mace. The high steel blunt weapon had just been completed and enchanted that morning.

You have

Attack: 14-22

enchanted:	Durability: 57/57
Sonic Spiked	Item Class: Unusual
Mace of	Quality: Superb
Shadows	Weight: 4.2 kg
	Material: High Steel
	Traits:
	+10% Damage vs Spell Barriers
	+6 Earth damage*
	6% chance to <i>Disarm</i>
	3% chance to <i>Shatter</i>
	Ignore up to 4% Defense
	Charges: 325/325
	<small>* +200% vs Air creatures, +300% vs Crystalline creatures</small>

It was a powerful weapon, though nothing compared to his elementum blade and its thirty-three to thirty-seven damage range. Still, Richter had decided he'd been ignoring his education. It was time that he started learning to use other weapons. Now that he could dual wield a normal-sized weapon without an extra penalty, he wanted to learn blunt

weapons. The Dungeon, surrounded by some of the most powerful people he'd ever met, seemed like a good place to start training.

Richter stepped up to the outer ring of his party, joining the tanks. He bashed at an approaching tusker with his mace. The beast dodged to the side, but he still clipped one of the bony ridges on the boar's side. It didn't do much damage, but the tusker was put off-balance. It nosedived into the grass floor, listing to one side. Richter used his short sword to stab the prone creature in the neck. Once again, the green glass metal was coated in blood. It slid in easily, the tusker's actual skin having almost no defense. Once, he had marveled at how easy it was for a weapon to enter a body. Now, sometimes it felt difficult *not* to kill. A spurt of arterial blood flew in the air when Richter removed his weapon. He moved on to his next target.

Though there had been nearly a hundred creatures in the cavern, in the space of minutes they were all dead or dying. Richter called out to his party, telling them not to deliver any more killing strokes. Alma had already attached herself to one of the nearly dead creatures that had been *Psi Crystallized*. A look at Sion was all it took to get the sprite to help her deliver the death blows. While Alma seemed to greatly enjoy the process of using her special attack, *Brain Drain*, she only needed to be attached at the time of death to absorb the creature's experience and solidify a psi crystal.

While everyone else checked their weapons, or continued to scan the

gloom, Richter began a mental exercise that Alma had taught him. He visualized his mindscape, seeing his mental avatar standing atop of his mental fortifications. He regulated his breathing. Two seconds later, he was ready. It was a strange phenomenon, but he greatly appreciated the time-slowness effect that occurred once he was within his mental construct. The passage of time didn't actually change of course, just his perception of it. For Richter, that was enough. He and his familiar had had what felt like a twenty-minute conversation with only two to three minutes having passed in the real world. With his mental defenses in place and his mind focused, Richter knelt beside a juvenile koran tusker and began to cast *Blood Mana*.

The incantation had come from the Bloodstone and been unlocked when he had progressed to the *initiate* rank in his Blood Magic skill. Now he could use the spell to siphon blood from freshly killed creatures. Each ten points of health that he stole, or whatever the blood equivalent was, would be converted into one point of mana. The Dungeon was already beginning to absorb the blood spilled on the ground, but the blood in the bodies was slower to ooze out.

Richter stepped into the center of the mass of creatures' bodies that had been devastated by the imbued arrows. As he cast the spell of Deeper magic, ruby-red light began to surround his hand and he felt the now-familiar power rise within him. Though he didn't notice, the crystal in the center of

the chamber began to shine a bit more brightly. A word of Power issued from his lips and his fist clenched of its own accord. Richter's arm bent in front of him and his hand trembled, as if he were holding a rope that was being pulled away from him.

Blood began to rise into the air from every dead creature within five feet. As it flowed towards him, it changed into light that was the same ruby color as the magic surrounding Richter's fist. The transfer rate was limited by his own skill level in Blood magic. Every second, he could absorb two mana per level per blood source. With twelve bodies within his magical reach, his mana was filling up at a rate of twenty-four MP per second. Blood flowed out of the bodies towards the swirling disc of blood-red energy in front of his hand. When it touched the magic, it was converted to pure mana.

His lips twisted into a fierce grin. The power of it all! The blood of the enemies he had slain was literally converted into energy that was his to command! He started to marvel in his own glory, but then stopped himself. Raw emotion was the hallmark of Blood Magic, and he had led his people into danger before because he had become unbalanced by it.

Focusing on his mental fort, Richter forced those impulses outside of his construct. The feeling of megalomania eased. He still felt a bit euphoric at the blood energy he was feeding on, but the impulse didn't come close to unbalancing him again. Less than a minute later, his entire mana pool of six

hundred and fifty-four points was refilled. The spell cut off and blood that had been streaming towards him from more than a dozen creatures fell with a *splat* onto the ground. Some splashed Sion's boot. The sprite favored his friend with an irritated look. Richter didn't care. He also didn't notice the uncomfortable glances from some of his other party members. He *loved* Blood Magic!

Alma continued to drain anything that was left alive. With Sion stabbing the creatures as soon as she locked on, she was able to kill several per minute. Richter for his part walked towards the body of the largest prowler that had attacked. Now that it was dead he couldn't use *Analyze*, so he couldn't see its stats. Then again, he thought, sometimes bigger is just better. He touched a patch of fur that wasn't matted in blood and focused on his Symbiosis Boon. A table appeared in his view, the dark red color of Blood magic.

*Through your s***Symbiosis Boon***, you may absorb 10% of one of this Level 16*
Jenit Prowler's primary stats at a cost of 50 points of your maximum mana.

Which do you choose?

STAT	BASE VALUE	ADDED TO YOU
Strength	12	+1
Agility	39	+4

Dexterity	40	+4
Constitution	16	+1-2
Endurance	3	+0
Intelligence	4	+0
Charisma	6	+0
Luck	12	+1

Richter had already decided. He chose “Agility.” The end of his mana bar greyed out, now fifty points less. He didn’t care though because he was instantly much lighter on his feet. The four points he had picked up made him almost 13% faster than he’d been before. As far as Richter was concerned, the fifty mana was a small price to pay for the increased capabilities of his body. He started to get excited thinking about how stronger enemies would give an even greater boon. It was also awesome that his Symbiosis Boon let him know the stats of slain creatures. It had been a weakness of his Analyze skill that had bugged him from time to time.

He checked the other creatures, but only found three that would give him a plus four to one of his stats. In the end, at a cost of two hundred mana he increased his Agility by twelve and his Constitution by four. His body

flooded with power each time. He couldn't understand how he had ever had such heavy feet, and his higher Con made him feel like he'd injected redbull. Richter was almost bouncing in anticipation of trying out his new capabilities.

There were also prompts awaiting. A cascade of experience notifications showed up in his vision. Most of the creatures Alma had drained were below level ten and so only offered a modest amount of XP. He even saw that a few had been level one or two, clearly the juveniles. Those prompts were just ridiculous.

*You have been awarded **51** experience (base $1,178 \times 0.07 \times 1.25 \times 0.5$) from Brain Drain against Level 2 Koran Tusker piglet.*

Richter had gained more experience just from killing creatures in battle. Those fifty points would have been 5% of what he needed to level when he first got to The Land. Now it was a drop in the bucket. It just drove home that as wonderful as his familiar's *Brain Drain* was, he needed to fight stronger enemies if he was going to keep power leveling. Despite the low levels of the monsters, he had still made progress against his experience debt.

*XP deficit remaining: **-121,162***

Richter also gained a new skill.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Mace Wielding**. Though*

*bladesmen look down upon the wielders of clubs and maces, they are fools. Heavy armor matters naught if it is caved into someone's chest. True masters of this skill can slay foes clad in adamantium plate. +3% **Damage to equipped maces or clubs. Ignore up to 0.5% of an Enemy's armor per level.***

Richter looked at his weapon with new appreciation. The ability to ignore armor could be amazing in certain situations. His short swords were powerful, but it was only the mighty materials they were made of that let him kill most enemies. The rock giant had shrugged off almost anything he'd thrown at it due to its ridiculously high natural armor. If he leveled up in Mace Wielding though, heavily armored foes would be a lot easier to take down. The +3% bump to Damage didn't hurt either. He resolved to learn other weapons as soon as he could.

An even better surprise was that having Companions once again proved to be a versatile benefit; the Dungeon still recognized his party as having only five people. Richter found that out at the same time as everyone else. Ten opaque blood-red spheres had appeared over the bodies of fallen monsters. It was loot! Randolphus assured them that rewards wouldn't have been provided if the Dungeon thought they were cheating. As each orb was touched, the globes disappeared and treasure fell to the ground.

There were a smattering of coins that still didn't add up to much.

You have found: 4 Silver Coins and 28 Copper Coins

And once again there were also a few low-level potions.

You have
found:
**Health
Potion**

Alchemy Class: Common

Alchemy Level: Tincture

Alchemy Strength: Clouded

Durability: 5/5

Weight: 0.1 kg.

Traits: Will restore 19 Health Points over 119 seconds.

You have
found:
**Stamina
Potion**

Alchemy Class: Common

Alchemy Level: Tincture

Alchemy Strength: Weak

Durability: 5/5

Weight: 0.1 kg.

Traits: Will restore 31 Stamina Points over 115 seconds.

The last potion was actually *tainted* strength, something Richter hadn't come across before. The health restored was extremely modest and it came with a debuff.

You have found: Health Potion	Alchemy Class: Common Alchemy Level: Brew Alchemy Strength: Tainted Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Will restore 8 Health Points over 143 seconds. Will degrade your mana regeneration by 0.2/sec for the same duration.
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Looking at all three potions, Richter noticed the points restored seemed to be right at the baseline for each alchemy level. He supposed that was because the Dungeon was new and there weren't any Rooms to increase the potion strength yet. Maybe it was also because he was just in the first part of the structure. Richter shrugged. Time would tell.

There were two other drops: a high steel dagger, but of a much lower quality than the one he had dropped in the Well, and a soul stone.



You have found: High Steel Dagger	Attack: 4-6
	Durability: 23/23
	Item Class: Common
	Quality: Average
	Weight: 1.0 kg

You have found: Common Soul Stone	Durability: 12/12
	Item Class: Common
	Stone Level: Common
	Status: Empty
	Weight: 0.1 kg

None of the loot was game changing. Still, Richter looked around at the Dungeon, his Dungeon, and smiled. His boy would grow.

Randolphus took charge of the gear. He divvied it up according to the tax he had spoken to Richter about before. The sprites declined the coins, though Sion took the potions to hand out among the meidon sprites. Beyan was given a share of the coin, minus Richter's 50% commission. Richter pocketed the empty soul stone.

When that was done, Randolphus turned toward him, “I checked the entire cavern, my lord. There are no other creatures here. I heard noises coming from each of the three tunnels branching off from this room, however. I recommend going down the entry to the far left. I noticed a great number of cloven hoofprints coming from that tunnel; I believe we are most likely to find the Lair in that direction.”

One of the surprises he’d had in viewing Randolphus’s skill list was that the man was an *apprentice* in Tracking. The Rogue’s affinity was reduced to 52% so he probably wouldn’t progress beyond his current skill level of twenty-six, but it still made him more advanced than Richter. When the chaos seed had asked him how he had advanced the skill while living in a city, he had expected to hear about how Randy hadn’t always lived in an urban environment. Instead, the man’s gaze had just become hooded and he had replied, “The hunting of a man is the same no matter where it occurs.”

That particularly creepy comment had happened the night before, when Richter had been about half a bottle of moonshine in. He’d decided against talking to Randy for the rest of the night. Besides, the Spy’s Tracking skill was coming in handy now. Richter led the group towards the tunnel mouth Randolphus had indicated and saw for himself the large number of tusker tracks. With a direction now decided upon, they journeyed down the tunnel. Behind them the bodies of the creatures began to degrade as the

Dungeon reclaimed their energy.

CHAPTER 48 – Day 143 – Kuborn 33, 0 AoC



Randolphus stealthed and scouted ahead. While he did, Richter dealt with his very eager and, in his opinion, very annoying familiar.

Master. Master! She waited about one point two seconds for him to respond before saying again, **Master! The crystals! Can I have them now? Can I have the crystals? They are for me, aren't they? Aren't they?**

After the battle, Richter had found Alma cooing on top of six psi crystals like a dragon on her treasure hoard. Exactly like that, he had realized with a smile. She had shown absolutely no interest in gold or silver, but she was in love with the psi crystals. When he had picked them up, she had actually nipped at him. He'd literally had to growl at her to make her behave.

Once he had them she had leapt onto his shoulders and done her best impression of a mincing cat, picking her feet up and putting them down over and over. If he hadn't been wearing armor it might have been very painful,

as her claws weren't exactly dull. As it was though, it was just very annoying.

Shutting her voice out as best he could, Richter examined the glowing blue-white crystals.

<p>You have found:</p> <p>Psi Crystal</p>	<p>Durability: 10/10</p> <p>Item Class: Scarce</p> <p>Level: 8</p> <p>Weight: 0.9 kg.</p> <p>Traits: This crystal is the captured psychic energy of a level 8 Koran Tusker. This energy can be utilized by Mental creatures to boost their growth and stats. The energy may also be used by anyone with access to Mental magic to greatly augment their spells. It can also be used by Mental creatures to augment their capabilities for a short time. Any usage will consume the energy all at once. Further uses of this energy may be possible and will have to be discovered.</p>
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Five more almost-identical prompts appeared, varying only by the

name of the creature and its level. Two of the crystals were from the juvenile tuskers, which Richter guessed made sense. They probably had lower resistances to everything, which made the *Psi Crystallization* debuff much more likely to take hold. In total, the gems provided forty-five Psi Points. As much as Alma loved them, she couldn't absorb the energy unless he willed it. Despite the fact that she continued her tirade about wanting him to respond, and even discounting the fact that she had now climbed on top of his helmet, he wasn't about to waste the points in a rushed decision.

First, he examined her status page.

Name: Alma	Level: 38, 58%	Race: Psi Dragonling
STATS		
Health: 130	Mana: 820 <i>Regen/min: 49.2</i>	Stamina: 180 <i>Regen/min: 7.8</i>
ATTRIBUTES*		
Strength: 5	Agility: 33	Dexterity: 34
Constitution: 13	Endurance: 18	Intelligence: 82
Wisdom: 82	Charisma: 18	Luck: 18
SPELL POWER BONUSES		
Air 50%	Life 50%	
RESISTANCES		
Air 50%	Mental 100%	Life 50%
ABILITIES (Unused Points: 3)		
Psi Bond – Lvl 6, points to next level: 5 Psi Blast – Lvl 3, points to next level: 3 Brain Drain – Lvl 7, points to next level: 7		

Psi Channeling – Lvl 2, points to next level: 2

She was halfway to the next level, which was great news. The problem was that while he could advance either Psi Blast or Psi Channeling, neither was the ability he wanted to advance most. Brain Drain had gotten an extra, and unexpected, perk when it had hit level seven. Now she not only absorbed experience, she also absorbed the memories of her prey. It seemed to only happen with higher level sapients, but it had already proven invaluable. If Psi Bond also developed a new feature at level seven, he wanted it.

There was something to be said for short term gains as well though. He accessed her psi traits page.

Name of Enhancement	Traits	Cost
<i>Natural Armor III</i> Current Armor: 5	Increase the natural armor of your dragonling by +1	40
<i>Natural Attack I</i> Current Attack: 5	Increase the melee attack of your dragonling by +1	10

<i>Flight Speed II</i>	Increase Flight Speed by 10%	20
<i>Convert to Ability Points</i>	Allows the Purchase of 1 Ability Point	40
<i>Chameleon I</i>	Your dragonling's body will change color by 5% to match the surrounding environment	20
<i>Convert to Characteristic Points</i> (Size, Race, etc adjustments still apply) Str 5, Agi 33, Dex 34, Con 13, End 18, Int 80, Wis 80, Chr 18, Luc 18	Allows Purchase of one Characteristic Point that will be added to base value	10
<i>Darkvision II</i>	Gives Darkvision with a radius of 100 yards	20
<i>Psi Poison</i>	Your dragonling's teeth and claws will now exude a stronger psi poison. The poison now causes a slight	40

	amount of health, mana and stamina damage. Chance of spell misfire increased and now there is a slight chance for spell backfire.	
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He was tempted to boost her armor again, but he'd already given her a further two points of defense. Him being a mother hen wouldn't keep her alive. It was important to make her well-rounded. *Flight Speed* was definitely a possibility, as was *Chameleon*. She was already pretty fast though, and he didn't have the points to get *Chameleon* to a useful rank yet.

Richter wanted to increase her *Psi Poison* trait. She had already proven herself a great help against magi. The fact that he could harvest the poison from her was also clutch. It turned his arrows into, if not wizard killers, something that would still ruin their fucking day.

What he turned to though was the fact that she was invaluable for recon. Their psychic connection let him know whatever she saw in real time, and the Traveler's map basically made her as good as a satellite for anyone standing near him. In less than a week they'd be taking a portal powered by

Dark magic to some undisclosed location; he was willing to bet someone else's left nut that it would be dark as shit there.

Nodding to himself, Richter chose two crystals. One was from a level eleven prowler and another was from a level twelve tusker. He pulled Alma down from her perch atop him and held her in his left arm. Then he brought the crystals in contact with her skin. A prompt appeared.

*You have brought your **Psi Crystal** in contact with a Mental creature. Would you like to expend the energy to enhance your soul familiar? Yes or No?*

He chose "Yes." The slowly spinning light in the crystals focused on Alma. The dragonling almost vibrated with pleasure as she devoured the energy. A beam of energy flowed into her mouth and eyes for a second, then a large pulse shot from the psi crystals into her. The jewels turned to worthless grey rock. Alma lay back, using his arm as a hammock and purring in intense satisfaction.

*Know This! Pure psychic energy can enhance the characteristics of your **Psi Dragonling**. Each level of a **Psi Crystal** equates to 1 **Psi Point**. Current Psi Points available: **23**. Any unused Psi Points will be lost after 24 hours.*

Now that she possessed the raw psychic energy, he made his choice.

*You have purchased: **Darkvision II**. Your familiar may now see up to 100 yards in pure darkness.*

Total Psi Points Remaining: 3

The greedy glut cracked her eye open a moment later, gaze locked on the other four gems. Her tone was as innocent as a cat staring at a mouse, **Wonderful Master... What are you going to do with the other crystals?**

With a roll of his eyes, Richter just dropped his left arm and let her fall to the floor. The dragonling let out a squawk of protest, but between flaring her wings and her natural agility, she landed on her feet.

Don't be greedy, he thought to her. Richter could have used the psi crystal he still had from the alpha dreemar. With it, he would have had more than another forty Psi Points to spend. He wanted to keep a higher-level crystal in reserve though, just in case he needed to supercharge Alma's abilities. The dragonling started complaining, but Richter didn't pay enough attention to hear if it was about him dropping her or that she wanted more psi crystals. Randolphus phased back into view.

"The tunnel branches several times up ahead. I observed several small packs of tuskers and a few solitary prowlers. Their levels are only one or two higher than what we have already seen, however. The greatest preponderance of tusker tracks continues down the main tunnel. I suggest we clear out the side passages as we go. The monsters I've seen shouldn't pose any serious danger to us."

Everyone was in agreement, so the party made their way down the tunnel. It was made of rough-hewn stone, just like the passage leading to the Entrance Chamber. After a dozen yards, the floor transitioned from grassy dirt to rock. The tendrils of roots hung down from the ceiling, and in random places, tufts of grass and other plants sprouted from cracks in the rock. Here and there, small rivulets of water ran down the walls. The air was cool, but not cold, and patches of moss gave off a faint light.

The tunnel was wide enough that four of them could walk abreast comfortably, but they kept their formation tighter than that. The decaemur knight took the lead with Yoshi right behind him, the two of them being the most expendable and strongest respectively. Richter and Randolphus came next, followed closely by Hisako and Beyan. The Hearth Mother had cast a spell that illuminated everything for a hundred yards in each direction as if it were noon, feeling the moss was not sufficient. Terrod and Sion pulled up the rear, looking behind them periodically to ensure nothing would flank them.

Just as Randolphus had said, there were only a few beasts here and there. None of the side tunnels extended more than seventy yards. Some terminated in dead ends and others in small caverns. The monsters were dealt with quickly. A few more blood-red orbs appeared, giving a handful of coins. After clearing each side chamber, they moved further down the main

passage. It was clear to both Randolphus and Richter that the prints they were tracking were increasing in frequency as they went deeper.

The tunnel twisted this way and that, sometimes rising in elevation but more often falling. After another twenty minutes, Richter started hearing loud squealing noises. The tunnel turned sharply so they could not see much further ahead. Randolphus stealthed and went to investigate. When he reappeared a few minutes later, he nodded and said, “We have found the Lair.”

The Spy described it as a large cavern, though not as large as the first room. It flared outward like a lady’s fan. Only tuskers were in the room, but there were more than a hundred, and their levels ranged from ten to twenty. One boar in particular was half again as large as the rest. The bony spines coming from his body were much thicker, and were black as opposed to the white of the other tuskers. The worst part of the layout was that there were no obstructions near the entrance. A few large rocks were situated at the rear of the room, but as soon as they entered the room, they would be seen. Richter and Randolphus could probably slip in with *Stealth*, but against a hundred monsters even they would be overwhelmed.

“I suggest we attack head-on,” Randolphus stated, surprising Richter. “The Lair beast is distracted right now. I believe we could remove a large portion of their number at the start of the battle, and we have little other

choice.”

“Why is it distracted?” Sion asked.

Randolphus winced slightly, “You will see.”

“Whatever, man,” Richter replied. He was in a good mood after the easy battles, so there was humor in his voice. No matter what Randy was hinting at, it couldn’t be anything his party couldn’t handle. The Spy also would not have advised a frontal assault if he thought it wouldn’t succeed. Richter sent Alma to scout ahead so he could see it for himself. The dragonling flew a short distance and grabbed ahold of the wall before slithering around the corner. Her darkvision served her well when the tunnel turned sinuous and Hisako’s light was lost from sight. A minute after she’d left, Alma saw the cavern and discovered what Randolphus had been referencing. Richter’s own eyes widened.

“Well?” Sion asked, impatient now. “What is it?”

Richter opened his mouth but didn’t speak, looking at Randolphus. The chamberlain just smirked and shrugged in response. Turning back to the sprite, Richter made a half-wince face and brought his hands almost together. Then he separated them, rotated each ninety degrees, and brought them almost together again. “They’re... making baby tuskers. Especially the big one with the black spikes... I feel bad for that lady monster.”

The plan they came up with was fairly simple. They would enter the cavern with the tanks out front. Sion and Richter would imbue their arrows and take out as many as possible before the battle began. Hisako would slow the monsters' advance with a crowd-control Earth spell. After that they would just let the tuskers come to them and kill them as they did so. Their tactics were a bit cocky, but then again, their party was insanely overpowered. Everyone buffed up again and they attacked.

Hisako cast a quick Light spell, a white glow surrounding her hands. To Richter's surprise, when she began a second casting as they approached the Lair entrance, no light surrounded her hands. Her first spell must have been to remove the telltale glow that casters normally made when using magic. It meant that the tuskers would have zero warning before her attack. After three seconds, she stepped into the room and released the energy she'd summoned. The tuskers immediately began squealing in alarm and anger, but the damage was done.

A forest of six-inch stone spikes erupted, extending the width of the cavern and covering twenty yards of its length. The barbs were angled in multiple directions, seemingly at random. One of the pigs closer to the cave entrance was caught in the AoE and panicked. It ran this way and that, spikes scoring against its belly. Though hard, the spikes were also brittle, and more than a few snapped clean off on the tusker's own bony protrusions. That

didn't save it.

It eviscerated itself and a loop of intestine caught on one of the spikes. The sow ran another three feet, its own organs falling out behind it before it collapsed. A spike pierced its brain when it fell. Richter looked at his ally in shock. Apparently, when Hisako heard "crowd control," she thought "horrifying bramble of eviscerating spikes." Hearth Mother... Australian for badass.

Yoshi, Terrod and Beyan's pet rushed into the cavern as soon as Hisako had finished her spell. Richter and Sion followed right after and began to imbue. Randolphus stealthed and moved to the side, while Beyan and Hisako took up the rear. Even as Richter poured mana into his shot, he used *Analyze* on the largest monster.

Name: Koran Ebontusker

Disposition: Angry

Ebontuskers are an evolution beyond Koran Tuskers. The bony protrusions on their body have been hardened to greatly increase their attack. Their enlarged size also increases their Health, Stamina and Strength, while their coloring helps them hide even in plain sight. Packs of tuskers led by an ebontusker are almost rabidly aggressive and will fight to the death. What ebontuskers are most known for, however, is their incredibly intense mating practices.

Level: 22

Health: 712 **Mana:** 20 **Stamina:** 712

Strength: 31

Agility: 21

Dexterity: 22

Constitution: 64

Endurance: 71

Intelligence: 2

Wisdom: 3

Charisma: 5

Luck: 10

“That thing is a lot stronger than the others,” Richter called out.

“No shit!” Sion responded, staring at the boss hog. It had to weigh a ton.

The two friends kept imbuing their arrows while the keening and squealing from the tuskers continued on the far side of the spikes. After seeing the first tusker die so horribly, Richter thought the rest might stay on the far side of Hisako’s spell. All of them immediately started rushing forward though. Monster after monster foundered on the spikes, but they also destroyed the rocky obstructions in the process. In the meantime, the ebontusker just kept rutting on top of the sow beneath him, not at all worried by the attackers in his lair.

Richter and Sion kept pouring mana into their shots. The tuskers got closer and closer. The ones in front began to act like a meaty plow for the monsters pushing from behind. It wasn’t planned at all as the beasts weren’t capable of that, but pushing a wall of dead bodies in front of them greatly reduced the damage many of the tuskers took crossing Hisako’s crowd-control spell’s AoE. Fortunately, it also slowed them considerably. Five

seconds passed, then ten. Both of the Companions had hundreds of mana invested by the time the first tusker broke through the rock spikes. The two friends released simultaneously.

The concussive booms were deafening in the confined space of the cavern. Richter's party knew what to expect, but some of the tuskers panicked and drove themselves onto rock spikes. Not many of them, but the imbued arrows had a devastating effect. The tusker that Richter targeted turned into chunks of flesh when the high steel arrow detonated against its face. The shockwave spread out, doing damage to any other creature within six feet of the attack. They were also afflicted with *Mind Fog*, *Stun* and *Psi Crystallization* randomly. The first effect was the most common by far and basically caused horrible confusion. Though it didn't directly harm those afflicted, it could be disastrous in larger groups. That was made obvious when three of the tuskers started attacking their fellows, a fourth ran to the side impaling itself on spikes and a fifth just started running in circles like a dog trying to catch its own tail.

The rest of the monsters cleared the spikes and raced towards the party. Richter shouldered his bow and drew both his mace and elementum short sword. He took his place with the tanks and the battle was joined!

The chaos seed bellowed as he swung his mace down in an overhand swing. The extra points of Agility made moving so much easier. It didn't

increase his attack speed, but aiming precise strikes seemed easier now. When he had first learned about the perks of various stats, the prompt had made it clear there was more to each than what had been stated. He'd never been in combat immediately before and after increasing his Agility. It was now pretty obvious that the stat was increasing his accuracy with melee weapons. There seemed to be two direct results of that. One, the likelihood of him landing a successful strike increased. Two, he had a chubby as big as a whale because battling in the Dungeon was one of the most awesome experiences of his life!

Hisako seemed content to continue as support. She cast a spell that increased the Strength of the entire party by +10%, then just cast a ranged spell whenever a shot of opportunity appeared. Sion continued firing arrows, while Sapir shot blasts of Air magic at the beasts. The pixie's mana ran out after one beam, and his attack wasn't too strong, but one tusker was *Stunned*. Sion finished it off with a well-placed arrow to the throat. The sprite called out praise to his meitu'pixie and Sapir's wings fluttered in pride. Beyan cast Death magic and fired off Dark bolts from his wand. Randolphus backstabbed and fought off any other tuskers until he could fade back into *Stealth* again. Then he would restart the process.

The tuskers died one after another, but the battle wasn't completely one-sided. Despite the battle prowess of Richter's group, the large number of

the creatures coupled with their natural attack and defense meant that some damage got through. The decaemur knight was knocked down and had to fight its way back up. Terrod had blood on him from two minor puncture wounds, though Hisako healed the damage almost as quickly as it was caused. Richter had been bitten on the leg and a spine of one of the tuskers had scored against his side. Almost none of the damage made it through his armor though. Only Yoshi escaped the melee completely unscathed.

Alma dropped almost ten of the creatures at once with a well-aimed *Psi Blast*. It brought some respite from the immediate press of battle. Red blood dripped from the ends of both Richter's mace and his elementum blade. The small gobbets of flesh clinging to the mace were somewhat gross, but there was no denying the weapon was effective. It was much less "clean" than using a sword, just beating creatures to death with wet smacking sounds, but for better or worse, Richter was still having fun. After Alma used her primary attack, the chaos seed fell back a step, leaving Terrod, Yoshi and the undead knight to take over tanking duties for a moment.

More than half the beasts were dead and another thirty were injured. Amazingly, the ebontusker was still in the back of the cavern, doing his business. Richter had heard about being happy as a pig in shit, but this was ridiculous. The chaos seed was somewhat offended that the monster didn't think he was important enough to even quit fucking and start fighting.

Unable to help himself Richter started to shout.

“Hey pig... pig fucker! Come fight!”

The pig just kept rutting.

Okay, Richter thought glaring at the monster. We’ll fix this problem now. Right now! A mental command was all it took. Alma fired a lightning bolt directly into the sow that the ebontusker was enjoying so much. The bolt sizzled into the tusker, creating a *Stun* effect. That finally got the ebontusker’s attention. Just not in the way that Richter wanted.

The huge pig monster glared across the cavern and locked eyes with the chaos seed. With a savage grunt, the creature shuddered and the body of the sow finally slumped to the ground. The ebontusker finally started moving towards the party with a determined stride, priapistic member leaving a dripping trail.

Richter stared at it in disbelief, “Did... did that motherfucker just *finish?*”

“Yeah,” Sion responded even as he shot another arrow at a tusker. “And he made eye contact with you first. I saw it!”

“Mmhmmph,” Richter commented furiously, still staring at the ebontusker. He realized he was so angry that his head had started nodding ridiculously fast. “Okay. Okay. Let’s do this!” He hung his mace from a

belt loop, wanting one hand free for casting. Stepping back up to the line, he laid into another tusker, the elementum blade splitting its skull easily. Brain matter and chips of bone flew when he yanked his short sword out of its head.

Richter turned his attention back to the ebontusker, “I’m about to turn you into chorizo you dirty motherf- Goddammit!”

Another tusker had changed direction at the last minute, attacking him rather than Yoshi. The damn thing barreled through his legs and knocked him to the ground. The damage wasn’t too bad, especially compared to his hundreds of HP, but it totally ruined his swagger. The decaemur knight stabbed the tusker with its heavy spear, and Randolphus used *Backstab* to finish it.

Sion fired one more arrow, killing the last tusker that was on its feet. “You okay, man?” the sprite called out.

Embarrassed and extremely irritated, his friend got to his feet. The ebontusker was still moving towards them, starting to pick up speed. It clearly planned to bowl them all aside like pins. With its massive size, it might just be possible. The chaos seed was over it though. He was so pissed, he shifted to third person. Sheathing his sword, he responded, “Richter’s okay. Richter’s just unhappy.” Then he sent a final mental order.

Alma descended from the cavern roof where she had been clinging to imperfections in the rock surface. The ebontusker never detected her until she had latched onto its head. Then it was too late. The creature might have been a Lair boss, but it was still under level thirty-one. Having no resistance to Thought magic and a low Intelligence, it was easy pickings for the dragonling's special attack. It collapsed immediately, one front leg kicking in spasm as she consumed its mental energy. *Brain Drain* made her completely vulnerable as well, so she couldn't use it in the midst of battle, but one-on-one, the ebontusker was just prey to Richter's little predator.

The rest of the party swept through the room, giving merciful death blows to the tuskers that remained alive. Richter paused for a moment to cast *Soul Trap* on the ebontusker, then he created his mental fort again. Once he was prepared, he cast *Blood Mana*. With so many fresh kills to draw on, his mana was restored in mere seconds. The smell left something to be desired, but they had won. The chaos seed looked down at the ebontusker, thinking about giving it a quick and merciful death, but then just shrugged and moved on. The monster had been a real dick. He let it suffer.

Richter looked around the cavern, still slightly unnerved at seeing the ground drink the blood that fell upon it. That uneasy feeling didn't keep him from sighing in contentment. He'd cleared his first Lair. Yup, he thought out to the Universe. His village was in the ass-kicking business, and business

was good.

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You have captured:

Soul Stone of an Ebontusker

Durability: 20/20

Item Class: Common

Stone Level: Common

Soul Level: Common

Status: Filled

Weight: 0.2 kg

*You have been awarded **14,345** experience (base 327,884 x 0.07 x 1.25 x 0.5) from Brain Drain against Level 22 Koran Ebontusker.*

*XP deficit remaining: **-105,952***

The big bastard had given some much needed experience. Even better though, Sion, Terrod and Beyan had leveled. Slaughtering several hundred beasts apparently had its perks, especially with the 25% XP bonus

from the Potions of Clarity. The bonuses from Richter's starting location were still insanely clutch. Richter's Companions had both reached level nineteen. Their skills were also progressing well. Each box showed the skill, followed by current level and progress to the next level, and then the affinity. They'd both been deadly when he'd met them, but they were becoming real contenders now.

Name: Terrod	Level: 19, 89%	Age: 46
Race: Human	Alignment: True Neutral	Languages: Common
STATS		
Health: 330	Mana: 120	Stamina: 190
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 33	Agility: 18	Dexterity: 18
Constitution: 33	Endurance: 19	Intelligence: 12
Wisdom: 10	Charisma: 26	Luck: 14
SKILLS		
Medium Armor: 8, 19%, 71%	War Leader: 6, 55%, 99%	Riding: 10, 95%, 83% <i>Horsemanship:</i> 10, 9%, 95%
Shields: 10, 62%, 97%	Cooking: 8, 13%, 96%	Swordsmanship: 8, 73%, 63%
Gather Information: 19, 6%, 92%	Small Blades: 13, 18%	Light Armor: 8, 51%, 68%
ABILITIES		

Comradery: +50% growth of positive Relationship Points and -50% decrease of negative Relationship Points

MARKS

Adventurer

Name: Sion	Level: 19, 93%	Alignment: Neutral Good (3)
Race: Meidon Sprite	Age: 34	Languages: Sprite, Common, Pixie
STATS		
Health: 273	Mana: 373	Stamina: 192
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 20	Agility: 18	Dexterity: 39
Constitution: 23	Endurance: 16	Intelligence: 35
Wisdom: 23	Charisma: 15	Luck: 17
RESISTANCES		
TYPES OF MAGIC		
Life 10%	Earth 10%	Light 10%
SCHOOLS OF MAGIC		
Enchantment 50%		
SKILLS		
MARTIAL SKILLS		
Archery: 44, 62%, 74% <i>Double Shot:</i> 12, 7%, 85% <i>Enhanced Imbue Arrow:</i> 17, 92%, 87% <i>Drill Shot:</i> 7, 39%, 90% <i>Focus:</i> 26, 88%, 81%	Small Blades: 19, 97%, 72%	Light Armor: 26, 78%, 81%
	Tracking: 16, 92%, 75%	

<i>Stun Shot: 6, 42%, 95%</i>		
MAGIC SKILLS		
Air Magic: 17, 73%, 100%		
CRAFTING SKILLS		
Alchemy: 10, 22%, 74%		
MISCELLANEOUS SKILLS		
Tracking: 16, 91%, 75%	Herb Lore: 12, 72%, 63%	Animal Husbandry: 1, 15%, 83% <i>Exotic Beasts: 1, 9%, 71%</i>
ABILITIES		
Wood Craft Concealment Know Thyself Meidon		
MARKS		
Adventurer		

The gnome Death caster had made considerable progress as well. When Beyan had been pretending to be a low-level alchemist, he'd only been level nine. Now he was a respectable level fourteen. The gnome had been leaving the village almost every day to hunt since getting the decaemur knight as a pet. That, coupled with the large number of kills his pet undead had racked up during the goblin raid, had power leveled the bald little dude in a very short amount of time. In addition to his increased level, Richter saw that he was only a few percentage points away from skill level fifteen in

Death Magic. That was apparently the magic number that let him animate skeletons. It would greatly increase the number of summoned creatures he could command at one time.

From conversations with Hisako he had learned the reason why Death magi were feared and hated in most countries. A highly skilled necromancer could marshal an army of the dead and wipe out whole villages and townships. Not that Richter feared this would be the case with Beyan. At least... not really. Besides, Death magic was, by far, the Basic Element Richter was least skilled in, so it would be nice having a competent necromancer by his side.

Richter had gained other prompts from the battle.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 13 in **Blood Magic**. New spells are now available.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in **Mace Wielding**. +6% damage when using maces or clubs. Ignore up to 1% of an enemy's armor.*

Everyone was smiling at each other, happy about the results of their efforts. Then, simultaneously, they all received the same prompts.

Congratulations! Your party is the first to clear a **Lair in the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos. You all receive a permanent boost of +5 **Health** for this feat! Each member of your party will also enjoy a temporary Attribute**

boost for the next day. Your boost is: +1 Endurance. You will also be given a one-time, greatly improved loot drop for slaying this Lair boss.

“That,” Randolphus began, sounding extremely satisfied, “is why I urged us to clear this Lair.”

“Not bad,” Richter said with a smile. He’d seen plenty of examples of how being the first to do something could have positive consequences in The Land. The five points of health weren’t a game changer, but it was worth half a point in Constitution. The boost to Endurance was kinda... meh, but it was still better than nothing. “Did you all get +1 to Endurance in addition to the +5 to Health?”

Most people nodded their heads but a few said no. Beyan’s Luck went up by one and Sion sourly admitted that his Charisma had increased. Richter thought the Chaotic nature of the Dungeon was asserting itself in the randomization of the boosts.

Meanwhile, Hisako was thinking about the Blood magic influence on the Dungeon, “The increase in health makes quite a bit of sense,” Hisako said thoughtfully. “From my reading, the bonuses from clearing Lairs is normally related to the Dungeon you are in. Blood magic is closely related to health.”

Richter nodded. “Why did so many of us get an Endurance perk

though? It was supposed to be a random boost. I was thinking we would all get something different due to the Chaotic nature of the Dungeon.”

“Temporary boosts are normally associated with whatever populates the Lair, my lord,” Randolphus answered delicately.

“Yeah? And?” Richter asked.

There was an overloud throat-clearing noise. Everyone looked up to see Sion standing by the body of the ebon tusker. Then, ever so slowly, the sprite put both fists out and stuck his hips backwards. The next series of motions were something that every man on every planet had done at one point in time. The sprite thrust forward and threw his elbows back. Then he reset and repeated... over and over. It was the creepy smile that really sold the performance. It was a bit much, but Richter finally got why most of them had gotten the Endurance perk.

“Sion!” Hisako snapped. The sprite stopped his antics and hung his head in shame, but as soon as the Hearth Mother glanced away, he winked at Richter and, with a cheesy look on his face, did it two more times. Richter chuckled in spite of himself. Hisako looked back again sharply, but by that time Sion was already walking away from the body with a perfectly innocent expression on his face.

Red spheres began to appear over some of the slain monsters. There

were about eleven in all, but the one that caught Richter's eye was hanging over the ebontusker. Every other loot ball, as Richter had started to call them, had been the size of golf ball. This one still had the same slowly shifting surface that made it look like a free-floating sphere of blood, but it was the size of a tennis ball.

Smiling in anticipation, Richter reached out and touched the red globe. It disappeared and an item dropped to the ground. After getting the prompt about increased loot, he had been hoping for some jewels, or maybe even an ingot of strong metal. What he got instead changed the game.

You have found: Chaotic Particle	Durability: Absolute Item Class: ??? Quality: All Weight: 0.01-1,418 kg Traits: This gem contains raw Chaos
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The tiny gem was the size of a pebble, but it emitted a large amount of light. It was the same gorgeous and enthralling luminescence that had shone from the chaos shard, but on a much smaller scale. Everyone else immediately recoiled from the energy it gave off. It felt wrong to them on the

most primal level. All of creation had been made from raw chaos, but every being knew that their very existence could be undone by that unformed *stuff* of the Universe. Everyone but Richter.

To him, the particle was the delivery of a promise he could not remember. It was everything. It was the pathway home. While everyone else shied away from the grey gem in an uncontrollable reaction, Richter reached down and cupped it in his hands like an egg fallen from a nest. It was precious and filled with a wondrous miracle. The feeling he had when he was near the Dungeon magnified a hundredfold, but he barely noticed. All that mattered was the particle.

*Congratulations Chaos Seed! You have found a Chaotic Particle. This small vessel grants you **2 Chaos Points**. Total Chaos Points: 95*

Richter immediately drew the power inside himself. He'd forgotten the feeling, like a blinded man forgot color. It was incredible just how *alive* he was with the energy flowing through him. The sensation wasn't as nearly as powerful as when he'd absorbed almost a hundred Chaos Points with the shard, but it was awesome!

He came back to himself a few moments later and was surprised to find that he was sweating. Blinking his eyes free, he turned to ask if anyone else was hot. The answer was obvious. Sion's hair was plastered to his face

and Hisako's robes were stuck to her body. She was wet! Like moist towelette, beer pong night at the sorority wet! Everyone was sweating, but even stranger, ice seemed to be coating the walls and floor. It was like the air had siphoned warmth from the rock. It was like a sauna!

Hisako walked up to him, and using the bony finger power that all women seem to get at a certain age, she poked him in the chest, "Keep your Chaos magic to, your, self." She punctuated the last three words with three more pokes. Then she just turned and left the cavern, walking back towards the Dungeon entrance. Yoshi shouldered past him following the Hearth Mother. Beyan looked at him like he was an alien, which is probably why he slipped on the ice and fell flat on his face. That did not help the unnerved gnome's disposition. He got back up quickly, and with a glare at Richter, left the Lair.

Even Sion looked at him as if to say, "Really, dude?" before leaving the cavern as well. Sapir fluttered after him. Terrod and Randolphus looked extremely discomforted, but they couldn't just abandon their liege lord. Only Alma didn't seem bothered. The dragonling was currently sliding around on the ice, having a grand ol' time. She was broadcasting a psychic message that sounded surprisingly like, "Wheeeee!"

Richter called after the others, "It's not like I planned this!" He paused a moment before adding, "It's Chaotic energy... Chaotic!" He

shrugged to himself. He didn't really care; he was on cloud nine after absorbing the particle. Looking at Randolphus and Terrod, he said, "I guess searching the room is up to us. Let's make sure we aren't missing any treasure!"

The two men exchanged a glance, but almost in unison told him, "Yes, my lord."

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The fact that the Dungeon could create raw Chaotic energy was incredible! Any reservations Richter had about making it stronger faded like smoke in the wind. If growing the Dungeon made it more likely to get Chaotic materials, he would do *anything*! The prompt after finishing the Lair had said the loot would be much better than what he could normally expect, so Richter didn't think he'd have Chaotic energy falling out of his butt any time soon, but it was still amazing.

So far, he'd only scratched the surface of his Chaotic powers. His "plan for the future" mentality had kept him from blowing too many Chaos Points in case he was in a situation later that required a large amount. Now that he knew he could get Chaos Points from two different sources though, the Dungeon and leveling... well, it was time to buy some cool shiz!

You have accessed **the Sea of Chaos**. The Sea contains everything that was, is or could be. Choose wisely, for you may choose the catalyst for

your own death and salvation.

You may reach the 1st Stratum at a cost of **1 Chaos Point**.

You may reach the 2nd Stratum at a cost of **3 Chaos Points**.

You may reach the 3rd Stratum at a cost of **5 Chaos Points**.

Which level do you wish to access?

Richter paused for a moment. If he was going to do this, he was going to do it right. He reached into his Bag of Holding and pulled out one of his four remaining Potions of Selak's Luck. Downing the silver liquid never made him feel any different. Sometimes the valuable potion, most likely easily worth ten to twenty gold, didn't seem to have any effect at all. Other times, it made all the difference.

He turned back to the prompts and spent a single Chaos Point accessing the first level.

Total Chaos Points: 94

1 st STRATUM OFFERINGS		
Offering	Chaotic Cost	Traits

<i>Belt of Spell Stealing</i>	5 points	Provides a belt that allows the wearer to steal spells that have been cast. This removes the spell knowledge from the target, and keeps the magic bound to the belt to be used at the wearer's discretion. Can hold three novice level spells of the Basic Elements. Each spell can be used once per day.
<i>Vial of Spirit Weakness</i>	3 points	This poison is imbued with the Deeper Magic, Spirit. Anyone afflicted with this will be 461% more susceptible to possession, mental control or any Spirit magic.
<i>Shoes of Cursed Jumping</i>	4 points	Provides shoes that increase the jump capability of the wearer by 319%. Proper landings are softened by the magic of these boots. The wearer must jump 500 times per day. Once donned, these boots cannot be removed except by an <i>Adept</i> level spell of the Basic Elements, an <i>Initiate</i> level spell of the Deeper Magics or a Higher Energy spell.

Damn! Richter thought to himself. He immediately saw himself jumping around a battlefield like an absolute boss! Firing arrows, getting out of danger... He might even be able to do a superhero landing! They weren't even armor, so he should be able to wear them under his sprite boots. If it wasn't for that pesky curse thing, he'd snatch them up in a heartbeat. The more he thought about it though... He hated being forced to do anything, let alone jump five hundred times a day. Even with the curse, Hisako could *probably* remove them, but not being able to take something off... that sucked. Also, he doubted the item self-cleaned. He couldn't even imagine the foot fungus situation if he sweated in them for a month straight. Nope. Those weren't for him.

The Spirit Poison was also interesting, but the most fascinating option of all was the belt. When The Land had only been a game, spell thieves had been one of the most hated and desired players to be around. Casters despised them, but if you had a good one, it could neutralize several enemy magi at once. Best of all, it wasn't fucking cursed. He made his choice.

Total Chaos Points: 89

As soon as he chose, the prompt disappeared and a hole with ragged edges appeared in front of him. It looked out into the roiling, grey void of pure Chaos. Terrod and Randolphus could not bear looking at the rent, but to Richter, it was just a slightly pleasing tableau. The crumbling voice spoke,

echoing off the walls of the chamber, “Claim your possession, Chaos Seed.”

Richter reached in and his hand disappeared as it crossed the plane of the small portal. His questing hand felt metal. Grabbing it, he pulled the Belt of Spell Stealing into his reality. The entire thing was made of interlocking rings of black metal. In front of the belt, there were three clear jewels. It was simple, but not plain. To Richter’s eye, it looked quietly elegant.

You have found:	Durability: 193/193
Belt of Spell	Item Class: Unusual
Stealing	Quality: Exceptional
	Weight: 1.6 kg
	Traits: Wearing this belt lets you capture cast magic. You must be within twenty-five yards of either the caster, target or path of the spell. Only <i>Novice</i> level spells of the Basic Elements can be stolen. This belt can hold three spells at a time. Each spell may be released once per day and three times total before it is lost to the ether.

This thing was awesome. It was like his Ring of Spell Storage, but it

could be used offensively. Stealing spells from others could be absolutely incredible. It could also give a non-magic caster access to magic for a short time. Someone like Terrod, in fact. He looked at his Companion, who was searching the cavern for any hidden compartments. Richter realized that was probably a fruitless exercise seeing as how the man lacked the Pierce the Veil skill, but even a blind rat could find cheese. Besides, Randolphus was there to help and the Spy was an *adept* in the skill.

Richter put the belt in his bag. He would experiment with it later but for now he had a decision to make. Whatever had happened in the past, he was pretty sure the luck potion was working overdrive this time. He hadn't been planning to spend more points, but if the first stratum had given him the belt, what would the third stratum offer? He had to find out!

Total Chaos Points: 84

1 st STRATUM OFFERINGS		
Offering	Chaotic Cost	Traits
<i>Recipe: Gilded Lie</i>	16 points	Provides a potion recipe that if poured over iron will change it to gold for 1-4 days

<i>Extra Respawn</i>	25 points	Purchasing this will extend your respawns by one. Your respawn time will revert back to the previous length.
<i>Unknown Skill Book</i>	32 points	Provides a skill book that will teach you an unknown skill that you possess an affinity for. Reading this book will advance you to skill level twenty-five.

Richter blinked. He finally had access to a skill book! He had no idea what kind of skill it would give, but still... a skill book! He had wanted to get his hands on one of these ever since he'd reached *journeyman* rank in Enchanting. No one could tell him how to make one though. Not Gloran, the other village enchanter, and not even the scribes, Bartle and Bea. Bartle had just told him that while spellbooks were valuable, skill books were much more so. They took much longer to create and the price was normally measured in platinum, not gold. Now that he'd thought about it though, he'd never asked Randolphus. The chamberlain was always doing a million different things at once, and Richter seemed to be fighting for his life every other day. He shrugged. No time like the present.

"Hey, Randy." The chamberlain looked up from the back of the

cavern. “What can you tell me about skill books? Specifically about how they’re made?”

“They are extremely valuable items, my lord. Extremely valuable and immensely time-consuming to create. I have only made one in my lifetime and doubt I will make another.”

“Why?” Richter asked. “I’ve made spellbooks. What’s the difference?”

“I, too, have created spellbooks with the help of a Scholar, my lord. The time required is miniscule compared to a skill book. The base time to create a spellbook is one day per spell level. A level five spell requires five days to finish.” Richter nodded, he already knew that. “The base time,” Randolphus continued, “to create a skill book increases with each level imparted, however. A level one skill book would only require one day, but a level two book would require three days and a level three, six. A level five skill book would therefore take fifteen days to finish.”

Richter nodded. It wasn’t a one-to-one ratio like with spellbooks. It was easy to see how skill books could take an insane amount of time to produce. The unknown book would get him to level twenty-five, enough to get him to the first level of the *apprentice* rank. He started to calculate just how long it would take to make it when Alma interjected.

Three hundred and twenty-five days, master, Richter couldn't help but hear the smugness in her thoughts.

"I would have figured it out, Alma!" Richter called out in irritation.

Heh, was the only reply.

Richter glared at his familiar for a moment, before looking back at Randolphus, "So you just need a high-level Scholar to help you then, right?" There were Talents Bea and Bartle could purchase that increased the speed of making magic books, and every skill level in Scribing increased the creation time by 2%.

"That is almost always helpful, but just as with spellbooks, someone involved in the process must have the Enchanting skill. There is more that you do not know, however. The skill books require even longer to create as you reach higher ranks. While each *novice* skill level requires a number of days equal to itself, level eight adding eight days and level nine adding nine, *initiate* skill levels increase the gap by two. Put another way, the tenth skill level adds eleven days and the eleventh adds thirteen. This increases with each rank from *apprentice* to *journeyman* until each *master* level increases the time requirement by six days."

Richter tried to wrap his head around that and do some calculations. He did take a second to tell Alma that she'd been flat wrong about her

calculations. There was more than a little snark in it. After a minute, he just grunted. It was math he couldn't do in his head. Which in turn, naturally and understandably, made him angry, "There isn't any way to shorten that amount of time?"

"There is, my lord. In addition to working with a high-level Scribe, each rank that you achieve in the skill you are imparting increases the speed that you can create the book. Someone that reaches *initiate* rank in Small Blades for instance, can make a skill book twice as fast as a *novice*. Reaching the rank of *journeyman* gives a speed boost of 300% and a *master* can create a skill book six times as fast. That is one of the primary reasons that only masters and adepts take the time to create skill books. Even so, it can be the work of months or years. They also cannot be copied or replicated by Scribes, unlike spellbooks. This is yet another reason why they are so expensive. Finally, even if the skill book is successfully created, it is worthless to anyone who lacks the proper affinity."

"What happens if someone without the required affinity reads the book?" Richter asked curious.

"If they have less than a 50% affinity in the skill, they would not even be able to use the skill book. If they possess middling aptitude, then they would advance in the skill until their affinity reached 50%. The skill book would still be destroyed and the knowledge of the higher levels would be lost

forever.” Randolphus stopped searching the chamber and looked at Richter, “Why do you ask, my lord?”

“I’ve got a decision to make,” Richer answered absently. He turned his attention back to the grey table hovering in his vision. From when it had appeared, he only had seven minutes before it disappeared, and with it, the opportunity to purchase these items. On the one hand, the skill he got might be total crap. On the other, it would still be a new skill. Also, he’d get the experience from reaching skill levels ten and twenty, even if it was a skill like Knitting. It wasn’t really a decision either, he realized. The southern gambler in him just had to know! He bought the skill book.

Total Chaos Points: 52

The voice intoned again, sounding gravelly this time, and another hole in reality appeared. Richter reached through and grabbed his prize. Pulling it through the rent, he saw that the book was about two inches thick. It was bound with some type of black hide and had a soft, almost furry, feel. A symbol was engraved upon it. Most people probably would not be able read it. Hell, according to Randolphus, most people in The Land couldn’t read anything. Richter recognized it as *tvrish* though, also known as “Old Common” by the people of the River Peninsula. His Gift of Tongues ability was not as immediately impressive as Limitless, but it had saved his life more than once. Here it let him know that the symbol communicated two words:

“Unconventional Materials.”

<p>You have found:</p> <p>Skill Book of</p> <p>Unconventional</p> <p>Materials</p>	<p>Durability: 18/18</p> <p>Item Class: Scarce</p> <p>Quality: Exquisite</p> <p>Weight: 0.8 kg</p> <p>Traits: This book was created by the orc Master Tinker, Bjurstrom. His ability to create bizarre items with the most unexpected of materials brought him much fame. Unfortunately, his penchant for adding decorative phalluses to his rings, necklaces and belts also drove away many patrons. Despite this, his creativity has made him remembered throughout the centuries, even more so as the orc race rarely produces crafters. Scholars often wonder what masterpieces he could have produced if his life had not been cut short by an ill-advised liaison with an ogre “maiden.”</p> <p>Reading this book will instill you with knowledge of the subskill Unconventional Materials. This skill enables you to use materials that could not normally be combined to create magical items. These</p>
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unconventional combinations can also create new and unexpected effects. You will immediately gain twenty-five skill levels and be granted the rank of *Apprentice*. As this is a subskill of Crafting, the primary skill will also be advanced to *Apprentice* rank as well.

Whaaaaattttt? This book was amazing! Totally worth the Chaos Points he'd spent. It not only increased a skill that he had wanted to explore for a long time, Crafting, but it also gave him a subskill that let him experiment and try new combinations of materials. When he had played the VR version of The Land, good crafters were worth almost their weight in emeralds. Many players learned to make a low-level Ring of Health or a Necklace of Weak Stealth.

Those were basic enchanted items that, though useful, were also kind of a-dime-a-dozen. Only a few players had learned to make unique and truly wondrous items. That was because Crafting had been both an elusive art and an exacting science. To make even a low-level Ring of Stamina, specific materials had to be combined in a specific sequence. Varying even a small amount would negate the enchantment. To make matters worse, creating a stronger Ring of Stamina didn't require just more of the same. You might

have to use a completely different process or entirely different materials. That was where the “art” came in.

The most powerful items typically were crafted with components gleaned from slain monsters or discovered relics. Of course, there was no manual for unique items, and people had spent countless hours combing wikis to no avail. Somehow certain players just had the knack of it and could make miracles happen. All the people who made such items ever said was that they had just “felt” certain materials could be combined in certain ways. Though there were countless differences between the game he had played and the reality of The Land, apparently this facet remained true.

From speaking to the few villagers with the Crafting skill, he had learned that the specific set of steps and materials needed to make magic items were called Templates. They served the same purpose as building Blueprints or weapon Schematics. Like all knowledge in The Land, the designs were jealously guarded and expensive in the extreme. Life in the Mist Village had many perks, but access to top-tier merchandise like that wasn’t one of them. This had been the primary reason that he hadn’t been able to advance his Crafting skill. As a Specialist Enchanter, it was infuriating. If he understood the book’s description correctly though, he would be able to successfully make his own *new* Templates. Thank you, Potion of Luck!

Richter cracked the spine. A beam of light shot from both the left and right sides of the book, bathing his face in light.

*Do you wish to absorb the knowledge of the **Skill Book of Unconventional Materials**? Yes or No?*

With great anticipation, Richter selected “Yes.” His heart started beating faster and his pupils widened. He *knew*!

When he learned spells from a book, the sensation was that of the knowledge flowing into him. He received a sequence of facts and the ability to apply them. That was a pale shadow of this experience. Richter’s consciousness poured into the book itself. He watched as Bjurstrom initially learned the subskill. No, while the orc *invented* the subskill. The chaos seed stood silent witness as the orc was first ridiculed, then beaten, by the other members of his tribe. That derision turned to grudging respect as the orc made items that gave his people an edge in battle. As his skills progressed further, that silent respect turned to cheers of esteem and veneration. Richter learned as Bjurstrom learned. He watched over his shoulder, and occasionally it seemed that the orc spoke to him, explaining both successes and failures. At times he even *was* the orc, a sensation that was interesting, but also unsettling.

When the experience ended, it was clear that the orc was only

beginning to scratch the surface of his skills and experiences. Richter was left with skill experience sufficient to make him an *apprentice*. As his consciousness flowed out of the book and back into his body, he became aware that someone was shouting his name.

“Richter!”

“As I told you, sprite Sion, the connection cannot be broken once begun. Now that the book is crumbling, he will quickly come back to himself.”

“I heard you before,” Sion snapped at Randolphus. “I just want this gyoti to know how damn dumb he is!”

“What?” Richter asked confused. He felt like he’d taken the deepest nap of his life. He was groggy, but also well rested. “Why are you shouting, Sion?”

“Why? Why?” his friend asked, his voice rising even higher with each word. “*That* is why!” the sprite pointed behind him.

Richter looked and was shocked to see ten jenit prowler and seven koran tusker bodies piled near the entrance to the cavern. He was sure the prowlers hadn’t been there before, and unless Richter was wrong, there hadn’t been any tuskars lying in that particular spot either.

“How?” the chaos seed asked.

“You’ve been staring into the goblin-cursed book for the past two hours... asshole!” Sion’s familiarity with the swears Richter had taught him was really improving.

“Two hours?” Richter repeated. His head still felt a bit foggy. He could remember living through so many experiences with Bjurstrom, but now, it felt like it had all passed in an instant. “Are you sure?” he asked.

Sion face adopted the most incredulous expression imaginable. Turning to Terrod he asked, “Did he really just ask me if I’m sure? Am I sure?” The last three words were clipped and spread out. They were further punctuated by him leaning close to Richter’s face. His final words were said with all the dismissive power of a teenage girl asked about her day, “Just die.”

The sprite took a deep breath and controlled himself. Even he thought that was a bit mean, but he still wasn’t going to let Richter fully off the hook, “Yes, I’m sure. Terrod and Randolphus have been protecting you from any Dungeon creature that wanted to eat your helpless gyoti ass for most of the last two hours. I’ve been helping them since I returned about fifteen minutes ago. You’ve just been staring into that book with that light shining on your face, and not even shaking you would snap you out of it.”

“A fact which I told him, my lord, though he felt the need to test the

theory himself. Several times in fact,” Randolphus added dryly. “Along with his “slap him back to reality” hypothesis.”

That explained why his cheek was stinging a bit. Richter looked at Sion who just shrugged, unapologetic, and still belligerent. The chaos seed took a beat, and thought about it. He did owe his friends for protecting him, “Well, I apologize. I didn’t know that would happen.”

“Did you ask?” Sion put to him, clearly already knowing the answer.

“Well... no,” Richter replied.

“What have we said about pushing magical buttons or using magical items when you don’t know what they do?” Sion said in a lecturing tone.

Richter was about to protest that he was not, in fact, a child, when the sprite continued, “Or have you forgotten about plunging Yoshi, Daniella and me into a pit filled with eaters? Or the time after that when you picked a fight with a rock giant? Or that time after *that* when you used a demon’s soul to grow the crystal garden and almost got us all killed?”

“Well, when you say it like that...” Richter began.

“Or the Bloodstone?” Sion cut him off.

“Hey, that turned out alright,” Richter protested. He gestured around to the Dungeon as proof.

Sion sighed and his voice grew serious, “I am starting to understand that impetuous action is part of your nature. You seem to crave power and change. I also know that you can learn, my friend. Though your actions have brought us wonder,” Sion mirrored Richter’s earlier gesture, and waved at the Dungeon around them, “they have also attracted danger and enemies. We all rely upon you. Your village has nearly a thousand people that could die if you were to disappear. Please do not forget that.”

Richter nodded and accepted the admonishment. “I will. Thank you for watching out for me. I still need to remind myself to rely on y’all. I’m used to doing everything myself. I’m lucky to have such Companions.” He made eye contact with each in turn, and they all nodded to him. Whatever happened in the future, right now, they were united. Putting a wry smile on his face, Richter added, “It was sweet of you to worry when I didn’t come back to the village. It’s downright cuddly that you came to check on me.”

“Yeah...” Sion said, rolling his eyes. “I barely noticed you weren’t around.”

“Then why did you come back in the Dungeon?” Richter asked.

A mischievous look crossed Sion’s face, “Krom is back from his Trial, and he’s pissed.”

CHAPTER 51 – Day 143 – Kuborn 33, 0 AoC



Sion refused to say anything else. Richter was going to summon a mist worker to carry the body of the ebontusker, but the Dungeon had long since absorbed the body. It was a bit of a disappointment because he'd wanted Tabia to have a crack at it. Just adding it to the lesson of not "pushing magical buttons," he let it go, picking up the body of a prowler as he shrugged it off. Then, having everyone pull in close around him, he cast *Dungeon Transport*.

Nine seconds later, the Companions appeared in front of the transport Node at the Dungeon entrance. Richter carried the prowler under one arm, an easy task for his thirty-three points of Strength. While they walked, he finally got to learn about his new skill.

*Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: **Unconventional Materials**.*

You may now create magical items from a wide range of base materials.

Where others see the mundane, you see endless possibility. Increasing your

knowledge of the world around you will make this subskill more powerful. A true master of this skill can create masterpieces from rubbish. **+1% to Creativity. +1% chance of a new design forming a Template.**

Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 4, 5, ..., and 25 in **Crafting**. +25% Enchantment Potential to items you create. +25% Success in combining components.

Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in **Crafting**. The perceived value of items you assist in creating is increased by +10%. This is cumulative with successive ranks.

Congratulations! You have advanced from Initiate to Apprentice in **Crafting**. The durability of your crafted items is increased by 25%. This is cumulative with successive ranks.

You have received **1,250** bonus experience ($\text{base } 2,000 \times 1.25 \times 0.5$) for reaching level 10 in the subskill: **Crafting**. XP deficit remaining: **-104,408**

You have received **2,500** bonus experience ($\text{base } 4,000 \times 1.25 \times 0.5$) for reaching level 20 in the subskill: **Crafting**. XP deficit remaining: **-101,908**

Congratulations! You have reached subskill levels 1, 2, 3, ..., and 25 in **Unconventional Materials**. +25% Creativity. +25% chance of a new design forming a Template.

Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in

Unconventional Materials. For known Templates, you may now substitute one component for another similar material. This number will increase with successive ranks.

Congratulations! You have advanced from Initiate to Apprentice in **Unconventional Materials.** You may now add an additional component to known Templates to augment the final item without compromising the initial intent.

You have received **625** bonus experience ($\text{base } 1,000 \times 1.25 \times 0.5$) for reaching level 10 in the subskill: **Unconventional Materials.** XP deficit remaining: **-101,283**

You have received **1,250** bonus experience ($\text{base } 2,000 \times 1.25 \times 0.5$) for reaching level 20 in the subskill: **Unconventional Materials.** XP deficit remaining: **-100,033**

The benefits from buying the skill book kept coming, and he hadn't even used the skill yet! The experience bonuses were always welcome. It was the skill bonuses that he was really excited about though. Now any item he made had a +25% bonus to enchanting potential. That meant he would be able to pack more enchantments into any belt, blade or armor that he created himself. As a Professed Enchanter, that opened up amazing possibilities. One of the most exciting was that Crafting was synergistic with his

Enchanting skill.

The rank bonuses from Crafting weren't too shabby, either. As an *apprentice*, any item that he helped to create would now be considered 20% more valuable than it would otherwise. That was amazing, seeing as how Richter intended for enchanted items to be a major export of the village. He was already relishing the thought of a certain quartet of brothers having to pay more than they wanted for his work. The bonus to durability could also come in handy. An item losing durability points would decrease its effectiveness or even make it nonfunctional. It hadn't been an issue as the Forge of Heavens could repair his gear to full functionality whenever necessary, but having more resilient items could never be a bad thing. It also meant the village fighters could endure long battles without a serious drop in the damage or defense of their gear.

The skill bonuses from Unconventional Materials also improved his chances of making a new Template. He was already closer to completing his first Crafter quest! The rank bonuses weren't too useful yet, seeing as how he didn't actually own a Template, but he had no doubt they would be in the future.

He went on to the next notification window.

Know This! Even the most skilled person in The Land is limited by their own

base nature. A boost of 50% to sword damage means nothing to an armless man. The subskill *Unconventional Materials* is influenced heavily by the **Creativity** of the crafter. Creativity can be influenced by any number of factors, but each person is born with a certain amount.

Know This! You have increased a Secondary Attribute: **Creativity**. Your base Creativity by nature is **1.1**. Unless properly stimulated, most never become aware of this personal value. The base Creativity of most sapients in *The Land* is 1.0 and remains dormant throughout their lives. Though you are not unique in improving this Secondary Attribute, you are now part of a select class of beings whose thoughts and ideas could truly shape *The Land* itself. Your own Creativity has been awakened!

As has always been true, **Creativity** is ephemeral and comes from the most unlikely of sources. Increased Creativity may have implications in all facets of your life. Increasing this value also increases the likelihood of having an **Epiphany**. Embrace all life to increase your own, but never forget that as you reach for the stars, success raises the likelihood of being burned.

Your now-awakened Creativity is affected by several factors:

- 1) **Chaos Seed:** Your Chaotic alignment of (2) increases your Creativity by +20%.
- 2) **Lore:** Your Lore of 1 increases your base Creativity by +10%.

3) Gift of Tongues: *Language is a matrix which shapes our thoughts.*

Your Gift of Tongues ability greatly influences the ways that you perceive the world. This ability increases your base Creativity by +1.

4) Unconventional Materials: *Reaching subskill level 25 gives a +25% bonus to Creativity*

Total Creativity: 3.26 (base 2.1)

As Richter's mind had recovered from the experience with the skill book, he'd started to notice something. There had always been a ceaseless stream of calculations, about a million different things, going on in the back of his head. It was a bit stressful, but it sometimes let his unconscious mind provide solutions to previously unanswered questions. What was interesting was that he'd started thinking of new ideas. The new skill hadn't only taught him about crafting, it had changed the way he saw the world. Now that he was actively thinking about it, there were other ideas popping into his head. A smile grew on his face.

He wasn't even that bothered by the fact that until now he'd had roughly the same Creativity as everyone else. It still did a little bit though. Not to be too big a dick, but most people of The Land were medieval in their mindset. They thought bathing was optional. How could his Creativity be the same as theirs?

No matter the answer, that was all behind him now. His mind was

exploding with ideas. He definitely needed to finish his other Lore book. That was something he'd been putting off for far too long. He didn't know what an "Epiphany" was exactly, but it certainly sounded good too! With a new secondary attribute under his belt, he checked his status page to see if it had shifted anything.

Name: Richter	Age: 24	Level: 35, 28%
Race: Chaos Seed (Human)	Profession: Enchanter	Languages: Sapient Mortals
Reputation: Lvl 5 "You are a man worth following."	Specialty: Essence	Alignment: Chaotic (2) Neutral
STATS		
Health: 717	Mana: 752	Stamina: 350
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 33 <i>(base: 25 + items: 8)</i>	Agility: 32	Dexterity: 38 <i>(base: 23 + items: 15)</i>
Constitution: 56 <i>(base: 56 + mark: 1%)</i>	Endurance: 35	Intelligence: 66
Wisdom: 45	Charisma: 36 <i>(base: 30 + Honorable: 4 + Impassioned: 5%)</i>	Luck: 25
RESISTANCES		
Air 50%	Earth 25%	Fire 10%
Life 50%	Mental 55%	Spiritual 5%
	Blood 5%	
ABILITIES		
Limitless: 100% affinity in any and every skill Gift of Tongues: Ability to comprehend almost any sapient language Fast Learner: +30% to speed of skill advancement		

Bounty of Life: +30% growth for the physical manifestation of your Place of Power

Psi Bond: +50% Mental Resistance

Maximum Communication Distance 1250 yards

Eye contact offers the chance to connect with other creatures in a limited way

Feel of Chaos: Detect sources of Chaos within 200 yards

QUALITIES

Resolute: +5% Spiritual Resistance, +5% Thought Resistance

Honorable II: +4 Charisma

Implacable: Awarded *Initiate* rank in Tracking

Skill

Impassioned: +5% to Movement and

Attack Speed! +5% to Charisma!

MARKS

Master of the Mist Village

Blood Oath of Vengeance

Forge of Heavens

Dragonkin

Adventurer

Symbiosis Boon

Blood and Chaos

BLESSINGS

Catalyst Blessing (Lords of Chaos)

- 1) +100% earned Chaos Points from any source
- 2) One free purchase from the Sea of Chaos. You may use this at any time.
- 3) +1 to the accessible stratum of the Sea of Chaos.

Richter furrowed his brow. Everything looked basically the same as the last time he'd checked. He still didn't completely get how secondary attributes fit in with his overall status. The first he'd even known of them

was when the Gambling skill had revealed the secondary stat Intuition.

Trying to get a screen to appear with more information hadn't produced any result. Now wasn't the time, but he planned to have a sit-down with Randy sometime soon so he could learn about them.

For now, he was just happy with his progression. Looking over his stats, there was no denying that he was a contender. Certainly not the strongest thing on two legs, but definitely not a pushover. His progress wasn't anything to sneeze at considering the fact that he'd literally been wolf shit six months earlier. Richter closed the window and addressed the next prompt. He'd gotten a new quest!

Congratulations! You have been offered a Quest: **Creative Spark I**

The true calling of any Crafter is to create a Masterpiece. Long is the road to this most hallowed of destinations, however, and there will be many stops along the way. The ranks of crafted items are *trash, poor, average, above average, well crafted, exceptional, superb, exquisite, and masterpiece.*

Success Conditions: You are tasked with creating 5 *superb* quality items using designs you create yourself.

Reward: One-time boost to Creativity to be used at your discretion.

Penalty for Failure or Rejecting Quest: None

Do you accept? Yes or No?

Absolute no-brainer, he thought. He couldn't wait to try his new skill and flex his new creative mentality. As a new *apprentice* in Crafting, he had a low chance of making *superb* quality items. It was effectively the highest rank of item he would be able to create. It was much more likely that he would produce *above average*, *well crafted* or *exceptional* objects, at least until he further leveled up his skill. There was a very, very small chance that he would make either *average* or *exquisite* items, but it was so low that it was practically negligible. Still, he knew that with practice he could finish the quest. Richter accepted it.

Dismissing the final prompts, Richter walked along beside his Companions. His mind was alive with possibilities. He was so distracted he didn't even realize they had reached the Forge until he heard the voice of a cherished friend that he'd missed more than he'd realized. Due to the content of what Krom was saying though, it wasn't exactly a Hallmark moment.

“Ay swear by the pussy beard of yer goblin mother that ay’ll shove every gods damned ingot in this smithy up yer pus-boiled sphincter. If ye dinna get yer cock lint mustache out of my forge *yesterday* ay’ll taint-slap ye! And yuuu! Dinna think ay canna see the state ye left my tools in! And

what are ye poor excuses for split cock sacks duin just looking while there be work ta be dun? Move yer shit-soaked britches and help stoke the fires. What are yew doing here? What be yer name? Stop! It dunna matter. Ay'll just call ye 'Head.' It looks like yer balancing a boulder on a toothpick. Go help Bowdin, if ye can, hauling that gargantuan cranium about. Dinna make that face at me, Head! Just do yer work and tonight ye can cry yerself to sleep on yer huge pilla!"

"Goddamn," Richter said to himself. He'd never seen Krom so worked up before. The crowd of onlookers that had been at the Forge earlier had cleared out. He wondered if their presence had been what had initially set the dwarf off. Krom was as jealous of his forge as a man dumb enough to take his girlfriend to a Wu-Tang concert.

Krom looked over as Richter walked in and his expression changed to a wide grin mostly hid by his salt-and-pepper beard, "It be good to be home, yer lordship! Ye can use a capital 'S' when ye call me Smith now, and na just because of me Job!"

That smile told Richter everything he needed to know, but he still used *Analyze*. A grin grew on his own face. The dwarf was now a Professed Smith!

Name: Krom	Age: 47	Level: 14, 28%
Race: Mountain Dwarf	Profession: Smith	Disposition: Loyal

STATS		
Health: 240	Mana: 160	Stamina: 270
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 30	Agility: 16	Dexterity: 15
Constitution: 24	Endurance: 27	Intelligence: 16
Wisdom: 15	Charisma: 10	Luck: 10
SKILLS		
Smithing: 46, 16% <i>Repair: 28, 62%</i>	Heavy Armor: 29, 72%	Medium Armor: 17, 93%
Hammer Wielding: 17, 81% <i>Stagger Blow: 5, 12%</i>	Earth Magic: 26, 33%	Life Magic: 5, 28%
Mace Wielding: 15, 84%	Mining: 28, 56%	Enchanting: 3, 55%
RACE DESCRIPTION		
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. Each level provides 3 free Attribute Points and +1 to Constitution and Endurance.		

Richter looked at the Professed Smith’s personal level in some surprise, but thought he already had an answer for why it was so high. Though the chaos seed’s Limitless ability was wonderful and had catapulted his skill progression, there were still some benefits to obtaining a Profession the old-fashioned way, namely decades of hard work and struggle. As soon

as someone gained their Profession, they had access to new quests that offered Talent Points as well as experience. These were simple “if-then” quests. Such as, if you forge ten *superb* quality swords then you fulfilled the requirements for a quest, and most likely unlocked the next link in the quest chain. If the first link required ten swords then the next would most likely call for a hundred.

The best part about these quests was they could be awarded retroactively if you had already met the terms of completion before your Trial. In those cases, you could get a massive windfall of Talent Points and experience all at once. Judging by the fact that Krom was now level fourteen when he’d only been level ten or eleven before his Trial, the dwarf must have crushed a buttload of his Profession quests thanks to his decades of smithing.

“Looks like you had a good time,” Richter said with a smile. “How’s Nexus?”

“Not a fan of yers, milord! Har har har!” The dwarf extended his hand and the two men clasped wrists.

“When I heard that you were back and that you were yelling, I thought it might be bad news.”

“Bad news?” Krom echoed.

“That you might not have passed your Trial.”

“Hmph,” Krom scoffed. “Smithing be in me blood. There were no doubt in me mind, and there shouldna been any in yers.” The dwarf fixed Richter with a baleful eye, not a small feat seeing as how the dwarf was about two feet shorter.

Richter raised his hands in mock surrender, “Well, have you gotten any cool Talents?”

“Oh ay,” Krom replied with a twinkle in his eye. “Ye might say that. Listen...” and Krom began to describe the first of his new Talents. “The first thing ay bought was *Increased Potential*. It cost me five Talent Points, but it will also increase the enchantment slots for any weapon ay make by 10%.” Seeing Richter’s smile, he commented, “Ay were thinking ye’d like that.”

The dwarf was right. Richter hadn’t even considered the fact that Krom’s Profession might be complementary to his own. Now that he was thinking about it though, it more than made sense. His Enchanter Profession was kind of an umbrella including Smithing, Crafting, Construction and, most likely, other skills and Professions that he didn’t even know about yet.

“Thanks for thinking of me, man,” Richter told him with a smile. “What else did you buy?”

“To be quite honest, yer lordship, ay was torn. The portal from me

Trial let out here in the smithy, and,” the dwarf raised his voice dangerously, “I was confronted with the horrible state of me gods-damned Core building!” All the other smiths paused for a moment, but when they saw none of them were the direct target of the dwarf’s ire, they just got back to work with a bit more urgency than before. Krom glared at his subordinates a while longer before turning back to Richter with a quick wink. The dwarf truly did love yelling.

“After ay got finished with me short ‘motivational speech’ for these jackalopes, ay was tempted to go the traditional route. Most Smiths pour their TPs into increasing the defense or attack of their weapons and armor. Any noble or chief will pay serious gold for a Smith that can increase the power of their armies. But,” and his voice grew serious as he looked Richter straight in the eyes, “Ay swore ye fealty and ay meant it. Ay be with ye til death, milord. When ay first came back Bowdin showed me the darkstone blade ye two made. It be truly marvelous. Ay have never seen the metal before, and yer enchantments be powerful as always.”

Krom walked over to the elementum chest in the middle of the forge. The smooth block of green metal developed a seam at his mental command and the lid swung upward. He reached in and withdrew two items. One was the darkstone blade and the other was the broken hilt that had been found in the cave of the dark aberration.

“I was meaning to ask you about that,” Richter said. “Why are you keeping some of that junk?”

“The junk of one man is the treasure of another,” Krom replied enigmatically. “Ay had a feeling that this hilt was worth something, but couldn’t be sure until now. Ay need to buy two more Talents. *Magical Repair* ta preserve the magic in the hilt while it is fixed and *Combine Fragments* ta merge. All ay was waiting for was yew, yer lordship.” Richter watched the in surprise as Krom bought the Talents in front of him. The dwarf concentrated for a moment as he made the purchases. When he was done, he looked at the hilt in his hand, and a globe of white light appeared centered on his fist and reaching halfway up his forearm. As soon as the light winked out, Richter’s *Identification* Talent triggered.

You have found:

Tqlor’s Hilt of Reclamation (Broken)

Created from the dimensional bones of a Greater Shadow Demon, this hilt and the blade that was once attached were wielded by the Dark Paladin Tqlor. A piece of the demon’s soul is still bound to this item. Using this hilt will shroud the

Durability: 5/147

Item Class: Rare

Quality: Masterwork

Weight: 0.8

Traits:

+5 to base Concealment

+3 Strength

+2 Endurance

wielder in shadows, greatly increasing their base Concealment stat. Whoever holds this weapon also benefits from some of the demon's powers. The more lives this weapon claims, the greater the powers it can unlock.

Level: 1

Your weapon hungers. Feed it to increase its powers.

Current Bonus: +3 Dark

Damage per Dark magic skill

Rank

“Holy... fuck.” Richter spoke slowly as if he was afraid that he’d scare the status window away. This thing was incredible. When The Land had just been a game, finding items that gave four or five different magic perks could be expected on any day that ended in “day.” The reality of enspelled items in The Land was that they were exceedingly difficult to create.

It required an enchantment be known and that powdered crystal, an expensive resource, be on hand; a smith who could make higher quality weapons, as low-quality items lacked the integrity to hold an enchantment; materials to make the base unenchanted weapon; and captured souls to power the enchantment. Getting the various people, skills and materials together in one place was an extremely difficult and even more expensive proposition. In a very real way, his village was almost an enchantment factory, and it

required hundreds of people working in conjunction to operate. It also cost Richter hundreds of gold a month just in salaries, not even including the high cost of materials.

His village had several unique advantages that let him create enchanted weapons quickly. Namely, the presence of the Forge of Heavens. That by itself was a massive boon. There was also the fact that Richter had stumbled upon a large amount of wealth and the Mist Village itself early on. If he had just spawned in a city, or in some other random place, the only access he would have had to enchanted items would have been what he could find or steal. Making his own would have been a pipedream.

Even after all that was factored in, he had only recently gained the ability to place two different enchantments on the same item. As far as he knew, only a Professed Enchanter that gained more than ten levels' worth of Talent Points could purchase the Talent that made it possible. Even becoming an Enchanter meant reaching a personal level of ten and a skill level of forty-five in the skill, something that most commoners never accomplished.

Defying everything that he had learned, this item gave multiple buffs to his primary attributes. How could this thing have so many bonuses? Attribute boosts were especially rare, and this thing increased several at once. How? Richter started at the hilt consideringly, then it hit him. He was

observing the true power of Crafting. The perks hadn't been added, they were natural to the bones of the Shadow Demon it had been made from. Richter was more excited than ever to explore his new skill!

He clapped Krom on the shoulder and held the hilt while rereading the prompt. In addition to the primary attribute boosts, it also increased his base Concealment. The fourteen levels he had achieved in his Stealth skill gave a 28% bonus to his inherent ability to hide himself. That capability was based both on the person and on the environment. An easy way to think of it would be that a black bear could easily hide in a cave, but would be fucked after a snowfall. Its effective Concealment would plummet.

Richter's own base Concealment was currently seven. Apparently, most humans were born with a base Concealment of one. Other races had bonuses that changed the value based on the situation. One of the wood sprites' racial abilities was Woodcraft. Among other things, it increased their base Concealment to a crazy high level if they were in a forest. He had literally seen the small men and women disappear in front of his eyes when they were only twenty feet away. Outside of the shelter of trees though, the sprites lost the bonus and were just as easy to spot as anyone else. Richter wasn't sure if hill sprites shared the ability or had something analogous. Forest sprites seemed to have an even stronger bond with the trees than Hisako's people. While the ability made the sprites more than dangerous, it

also seemed to hamper their skill growth in certain areas as few of the wood sprites ever learned the Stealth skill.

When Richter had learned the skill, his base Concealment had immediately been boosted by +1. Each successive rank he gained in Stealth increased it by another five. With his skill level bonuses, he currently had a personal Concealment value of +9. His allies had further helped him with armor that increased his base capability to move silently by +15. Even better, the *rare* item he had been gifted, his Cloak of Concealment, increased his base Concealment by +13 in every terrain, not just the forest. It was his gear that kept him hidden more than his skills, but that didn't make a difference to the enemies that died before they even knew he was there.

All things being equal, he should be able to keep himself hidden from anything and anyone with a Perception value less than his Concealment. As was always the case in real life, many other factors came into play however: how quickly he moved, how much noise he made, how effective his enemy's sense of smell was, the terrain, and other details. These could all mean the difference between being hidden or being seen which, in turn, could mean the difference between life and death.

In addition to the awesome boost to his stats, the shadow demon hilt effectively boosted him from *novice* to *apprentice* in Stealth. If he used the weapon, his base value would increase to over twelve. It would effectively

increase his ability to hide by 50%!

While all that was cool, the bond it had to Dark magic was perhaps the most exciting. The +3 to damage was awesome, but more importantly, the weapon was scalable! As he killed with it, the hilt might level up! It even looked like reaching higher ranks in his skill might unlock more properties in the weapon. The lack of charges in the description also seemed to indicate that the bonus powers the hilt provided were *passive* not *active*. It meant that the stat boosts and extra damage wouldn't run out in the middle of a fight. Krom had been so right; what Richter had taken for trash had actually been treasure!

“And you can attach this to the darkstone blade?” Richter asked excitedly.

A broad grin made its way onto Krom's face, “Ay can now. Being a Professed Smith has been a dream since ay were a wee nipper. I want to give ye a gift.”

“Attaching this hilt will be so amazing, man. I couldn't do this without you!” Richer told him magnanimously. If the dwarf needed a little ego stroking, he'd spit on his hand if it meant getting this weapon.

“Bah,” Krom shook his head. “This here be my Job as the village Smith. Ay woulda dun this for any clan chief ay pledged myself to. What ay

mean is a real gift. Ay have more Talent Points to distribute, and me old master told me about a fourth-tier Talent that could help ye greatly, yer lordship. Ay dinna want to tell ye what it be yet. Ay dinna want to ruin the surprise, but ay promise yew will love it.”

“Are you sure?” Richter asked, raising his eyebrows. Talents radiated out from the central sphere of a Profession like planets around a sun. In this particular solar system though, each planetary radius had several spheres on it. The number of rings you were out from the “sun” was the Talent tier , and the only way to reach a higher tier was to purchase a Talent from a lower sphere that linked to it. That meant Krom would have to buy up Talents that he might not want. Each tier was also more expensive than the one before.

Richter now understood why Krom was acting as if he was offering something of great value. It was because he was. The dwarf was offering to spend perhaps all of his Talent Points on a gift for Richter. He was touched. Though the chaos seed didn’t know it, Krom received a prompt that his relationship with Richter had leveled from *Interested* to *Admiring*.

The dwarf’s smile grew even wider, “Couldna be more sure of anything. Now that I’m back, I’ll also be ready to finally finish yer skeeling armor. I assume ye have the soul stones to power the enchantments now?” As hallmarky as the moment between the two of them had been, Krom’s voice was all business now. There was also a touch of exasperation, which

Richter knew was fair. The chaos seed had received *The Spirit of Defense* quest more than forty days ago from the Smith. To fulfill it, he needed to obtain enough high-level souls to properly enchant the six pieces of armor Krom would make. As if to confirm that Richter was dragging ass, a prompt appeared.

Quest Update: The Spirit of Defense

Krom has asked if you have enough captured souls to finally finish your new armor. He is growing impatient, as you seem to have time to do everything else except let him help you. While this quest will not expire, you just might not get his best work if you continue to spend more time swinging your sword, in and out of bed, than letting your Professed Smith save your life with a new and powerful set of armor.

Do you have the souls required at this time? Yes or No?

Your answer may determine how Krom spends his Talent Points.

What the fuck, man, Richter thought to himself. He had thought he was done with the snarky comments in his prompts. When he had first gotten to The Land, every other notification had seemed to insult him. Over time they had become polished and formulaic though. This was the first time in a while that he'd gotten one like that. It was a bit annoying, even if it was

perfectly valid.

Richter quickly accessed his inventory, looking specifically at the soul stones he had amassed.

Stone Level	Soul Level	Amount	Soul Point Value
Resplendent	Resplendent	1	300
Resplendent	Empty	3	---
Special	Special	3	100
Special	Empty	9	---
Brilliant	Brilliant	3	45
Brilliant	Empty	17	---
Luminous	Luminous	16	17
Luminous	Empty	38	---
Common	Common	42	10
Common	Basic	12	6
Common	Weak	14	3
Common	Poor	3	1

Common	Empty	50	---
--------	-------	----	-----

Even if he hadn't fulfilled the quest yet, he hadn't been a slouch. Months of battle and stealing of loot had added up. The maximum enchantment slots on each piece of armor would depend on the quality of Krom's work, but Richter felt confident that everything would be top notch. If each piece were *superb*, two *luminous* and one *weak* soul stone would be needed for each piece of armor. The lower level souls were easy enough to come by but spending the *luminous* souls would be a real scrot pluck. Still, it would be worth it. He hadn't reached high ranks in any of his defensive enchantments, but now that he could put two enchantments on one item, he might actually be able to fill all the slots. A worthy goal, he decided.

"I got your damn souls," Richter told the dwarf with an easy smile. "I want to see if I can advance my enchantments before we finally do it though. Can you prepare the armor except for the final steps? So we can enchant it all at once?"

"That be a good idea," Krom responded, nodding his head. "It will take several days to finish the skeeling scales, along with... other projects." The dwarf glanced up at Alma, making eye contact with the dragonling. Her eyes widened slightly, but she nodded her draconian head. He turned his

gaze back towards Richter, “Ay have another question for ye though, yer lordship. These here scales are tough and ye brought me many. Ye need to make a decision. Do ye want a set of light or medium armor?” As he asked the question, Krom handed over a scroll.

When Richter unrolled it, his eyes widened in surprise. It was a detailed drawing of two sets of armor, one medium and one light. They were both made of skeeling scales. Underneath was a comparison of the projected defense values of each piece, assuming a quality of *superb*. Krom had even added in the stats from Richter’s current gear, Enhanced Sprite Armor. Richter could have done without the little note Krom had added in the margin about it only being good for “wee sprites and wee lasses,” but the numbers didn’t lie. Krom was basing the different armor sets on leather and scale armor respectively. Apparently, the dwarf thought that the skeeling scales were equivalent to quicksilver armor, giving +5 to the base defense of each piece.

	Current Armor	Leather (base)	Light		Scale (base)	Medium
Helmet	7	5	18-19		12	31-32
Chestplate	12	7	22		14	35
Bracers	10	3	15		10	28

Gauntlets	7	3	15	10	28
Greaves	9	4	16-17	11	29-30
Boots	8	4	16-17	11	29-30
Penalties	1) Casting Penalty 2) 25% faster Stamina depletion 3) Movement and Attack speed decreased by 3% per piece			1) Worsened Casting Penalty (3.5x than Leather Armor) 2) 50% faster Stamina depletion 3) Movement and Attack speed decreased by 5% per piece 4) 3% penalty to Agility and Dexterity per piece	

“When did you have time to do this?” Richter asked impressed. “You just got back.”

“Ay be very mysterious, yer lordship,” Krom replied enigmatically. Even more strangely, Alma had alighted on an anvil in front of the dwarf and seemed to be strutting around.

Richter shook his head at his irascible familiar. Then he turned his attention back to the diagrams. Before Krom had brought it up, he hadn't even considered wearing anything other than light armor. He couldn't just ignore the facts though. Both examples offered a great deal more defense than his Enhanced Sprite Armor, the medium armor substantially more. Wearing the medium armor would almost make him into a tank. The penalties sucked, but the scaled armor was seriously badass!

He looked back and forth, but in the end, he decided on the first option. The casting penalty itself was enough to make him say no to the scaled armor. He hadn't experienced a spell miscast in some time, but the one time he'd suffered from spell feedback, he'd been rendered senseless. That was the day he discovered that if you wanted to kill a mage, force their magic back in on itself. They'd be so helpless you could deliver the coup de grace with a rock. Casting was a serious part of his combat style; he couldn't handicap himself. A miscast was still a chance with his light armor, but between his high affinity for magic and the fact that all of his spells were ranked either *weak* or *minor*, it really hadn't been a problem so far.

The other penalties certainly didn't make it any better. On top of all of that, he had already gotten some serious perks from leveling up his Light Armor skill. After reaching *initiate* rank, the movement penalty had decreased to 2% per piece of armor he wore, and being skill level sixteen

gave him a 32% bonus to any light armor he wore. The *initiate* rank also gave a *Synergy* bonus, that increased the defense of each piece of light armor by +20%, as long as that was all he was equipped with. That almost closed the gap. Richter made his decision and handed the scroll back to Krom.

“Light armor,” he responded simply. Then Richter cocked his head in confusion. For a second, he’d been sure that Alma’s scales had been glowing. When he focused though, he didn’t see anything and decided it must have just been a trick of the light.

“Ay,” Krom said nodding. “Was pretty sure that would be the choice, but had to ask. The good news is, it just might leave enough scales left over for another project.” He looked around at the flurry of activity around him. “Ay suppose ay should get back to work now, yer lordship, unless there be more ye needed?”

Richter shook his head. The two men clasped wrists and the chaos seed turned to leave, Sion and Randolphus in tow. Before they even made it outside the Forge, Krom had started cursing up a storm again. He was clearly enjoying himself as he was doing the Spanglish equivalent of Dwarvish and Common. “What are ye doing cleaning so much? This be a forge, not a fine lady’s dressing room. Mayhap ye should be working on swinging a hammer and not getting all fancy and pretty! Ye could always go up to the garden and pluck some daisies if ye dinna think it will ruin yer nails!”

Krom rapidly switched targets for his ire, as dangerous as a sniper on a clear day, “And yew! Head! Why don’t you move that giant melon on top of yer neck and do something useful? Ay know ye will be able to think of something to do, yer brain must weigh twenty pounds unless it just be rattling around in that humongous melon. Go stoke the fires, ye giant-headed bastard! Dinna look at me with that sad face. Get ta work!”

And on it went. Before they made it out of earshot, Richter heard the dwarf smugly ask, “Now which of ye ugly bastards wants a quest from me sweet and cuddly self?”

In contradiction to how the smiths should have been feeling after being dressed down in such a thorough manner, cheers rang out around the forge and they all crowded around Krom. Richter looked at Randolphus in askance, “Krom can give quests now?”

The Rogue adopted the look he reserved when he was explaining something that everyone except Richter would know. “Professionals are valued for many reasons, my lord. They, of course, have access to Talents that can greatly improve their power and capabilities, but they also can generate Profession-related quests. A Smith such as Krom must work hard to fulfill the rigorous demands of his own Profession quests, and so does not have the time to smelt ore, bind spearheads to hafts and other such time-consuming minutiae that are still vital to the running of a forge. It has always

been true that Professionals can encourage others that share their skill but are not as far progressed by creating small quests. The Professional is given much-needed support and less skilled men and women can earn necessary experience and expertise. I am sure you can see now why lords so desire the presence of Professionals in their settlements.”

Richter nodded, his mind considering the far-reaching consequences. He absently wondered if his increased Creativity was already coming into play. Having a Professional Farmer would certainly boost the crop yield of a village, but through the quests they would also increase the rate at which the village produced more Farmers. The growth could become exponential. The high incidence of sudden death and the decades often required to become a Professional were most likely the only reasons that Pros were so few and far between. Dozens of Richter’s people had been taken by Nexus to their Trials all at once though. As long as he protected them, and maybe even got his noncombatants some carefully regulated combat experience, he could have a village full of Talented people. He smiled thinking of it.

Sion peeled off, saying he would catch up later, and the other two men kept walking. A great deal had happened that morning. Richter had a lot to consider, but there was one question really bugging him. He told Randolphus about the irreverent prompt he had received in response to the quest update.

The chamberlain nodded, “As I said before, my lord, the prompts that we each receive are a personal interpretation of the will of the Universe. The Oneness is so far beyond our mortal minds however, that we each struggle to process the information. So you see, our notifications are actually created by each of us individually. If you are receiving personalized messages with a certain patronizing tone, that is most likely because you know that you should be getting your head out of your ass.”

Richter stopped walking and looked at his chamberlain in shock. The Spy just looked back and shrugged, “You asked.”

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Richter spent the next several hours training with Randolphus in Stealth, Small Blades and Water Magic. He didn't advance a skill level, but the Rogue told him that if he kept practicing the techniques his base stealth would increase. That was the first time Richter had heard about one of his secondary attributes increasing due to training. When he brought that up with Randolphus, the Spy had just shaken his head sadly. Then the chamberlain explained that with proper training, that was an extremely common occurrence. While primary attributes could increase, like getting an extra point in Endurance if he ran a great distance, that was much less likely. Richter's Limitless ability had helped him to catapult through skill levels and made it possible for him to compete with people who had invested years in their capabilities.

The chamberlain instructed him in techniques to throw his daggers better and ways to fight with his short swords. One thing became clear to

Richter through the hours of training: he had a great deal to learn.

It was well into the afternoon when they finished, and he was starving. Richter made his way over to the feast area and dug into some food. It had become common practice for some dry food to be left out under cloth. He had to shake a few bugs off his meal, but there were many things he'd become accustomed to since coming to The Land. After breaking his fast, he did something that he had been putting off for far too long. He decided to train with his guards. There were more martial skills to be had, and he intended to grab them all.

When Richter walked up to the training ground, he was pleased to see dozens of guards sparring and training. The last time he had come through, the men and women of the guard had seemed a bit ramshackle. If he remembered correctly, one woman had actually beaten her husband senseless in front of him, something about the man's wandering hands having found a few of the other village women. Now, it was completely different. The fires of war had tempered his fighters.

The guards were moving through drills with serious expressions and intensity, all under Caulder's watchful gaze. They sparred using specific attacks and defenses, building the muscle memory necessary for all true warriors. The new corporals, Ox and Schroeder, seconded the sergeant's shouts, already easing into their new roles. "Form one! Keep that blade up!

Good. Now reset. Ready? Form two! Attack!”

Terrod walked up to where Richter was watching, “Can I help you, my lord?”

Richter nodded, “Teach me everything you know about fighting.”

Terrod smiled broadly, “I thought you would never ask, sir.”

Over the next few hours, the chaos seed gained valuable new skills.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Shields**. Some say that attacking is the greatest way to defeat an enemy. Any shieldsman can tell you that living longer than your enemy is the only true way to win. A true master of this skill can ward off even the blows of fate with his head held high. When using an equipped shield: +3% **Shield Defense**. -1% **Stamina cost to block with shield**.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Staves**. In the hands of a shepherd or a Monk, the staff can be used to protect, or kill. Only a fool underestimates a fighter armed with a stout length of wood. A true master can stand in a storm of blades and never take a cut. When using an equipped stave: +1% **Attack Damage**. +3% **Attack Speed**.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Spears**. The frontline of any army, spear and pikemen stand tall before waves of enemies with a simple message, “Not today.” A true master can disable an army before they ever*

*get within reach. When using an equipped spear: +2% **Attack Damage**.*

Ignore 1% of an Enemy's armor.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Crossbows**. Though not as elegant as the bow, crossbows are not designed to deliver poetry. They deliver death. The stopping power of these devices cannot be ignored. A true master can pierce the armor of titans. When using an equipped crossbow: +3% **Attack Damage**. +5% **Reload speed**.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Axes**. There is no greater satisfaction than the splatter of a foe's blood on your face. While swords can pierce and maces can crush, it takes an axe to truly CLEAVE! A true master can chop through the limbs of giants. When using an equipped axe: +3% **Attack Damage**. +1% **Attack Speed**.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Hammer Wielding**. When the biggest bastard on the battlefield is coming straight at you, there is only one true response: to smash his knee with a hammer and bring him down to size! A true master can sunder the gates of Aractherix. When using an equipped hammer: +4% **Attack Damage**.*

He didn't just learn the skills, but also started learning the appropriate techniques for each weapon. He even picked up a trick or two. He was about to start practicing his Unarmed Combat skill with Ox when that strange

feeling occurred again. The same heightened *awareness* he felt when he approached the Dungeon. This time, the feeling didn't get weaker though, it grew stronger. Richter looked around, but nothing seemed amiss. All he could see out of the ordinary was a guard walking across the training ground with one of the freed prisoners in tow. The guard was laughing and smiling, so Richter didn't see any reason to be concerned.

When they were within a hundred yards, the feeling grew much stronger and Richter was certain it was coming from one of the two men. It didn't take a huge leap of logic to know that it came from the man accompanying his guard. Richter used *Analyze*.

Name: Heman	Race: Half-Gnome/ Half-Human	Disposition: Admiring
	Level: 7	
STATS		
Health: 120	Mana: 120	Stamina: 170
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 17	Agility: 11	Dexterity: 10
Constitution: 12	Endurance: 17	Intelligence: 12
Wisdom: 12	Charisma: 24	Luck: 10
SKILLS		
Mining: 24	Small Blades: 5	Scavenging: 6
Dark Magic: 2	Stealth: 5	Cooking: 3
DESCRIPTION		
<i>Racial blends are erratic in their disposition and powers. The offspring of</i>		

such a union can inherit all or none of any of their parent races' characteristics.

There really wasn't all that much that stood out about the man. His stats were middling and his attributes didn't seem all that great. Richter's *Analyze* skill wasn't good enough to tell him what Heman's abilities were, but from what he could see so far, there was nothing that explained the feeling he had. Now that the two were closer though, there was no doubt in the chaos seed's mind that it was coming from this man.

"What are you doing, Teyin?" Caulder snapped at the guard. "Why did you bring this man out of the area Lord Richter set aside for the freed prisoners?"

"I know this is a breach of protocol, sergeant, but this man has a gift for Lord Richter. I have gotten to know him over the past several days and I can promise that he is trustworthy. He merely asked to speak with you."

"Then why did you not tell me so that I could come to him?" Caulder's voice was sharp with rebuke over the breach in protocol. "I still see no reason why you have brought him into the mists."

Heman was looking around. He was searching for Caulder, but his not having immunity to the mists would mean that anything beyond five to ten feet away appeared to just be a solid wall of white vapor. Despite not

being able to locate the sergeant, Heman spoke up with a sure and friendly voice however, “I would ask to take responsibility for Guard Teyin bringing me here.”

He gave a small laugh, “Honestly, I also begged him to let me stretch my legs. That is not the main reason I asked to be brought to his superior, however. I assume I am speaking to Sergeant Caulder or Captain Terrod?” There was no response, but the half-gnome remained undaunted. After a few moments, he continued, his voice turning earnest, “I wanted to thank you personally. You and your people have been so wonderfully helpful. We, myself and the other men and women you freed from the goblins, all owe you our lives. I wanted to let you know that I personally recognize that and am supremely grateful.

“Even after we arrived in your village, you helped us further by removing those traitors.” Heman spat the last word. “Those bastards had preyed on the rest of us for so long. In my opinion, they deserved worse than what they got.”

Richter and Terrod exchanged a glance at the man’s vehemence, but they remained silent. Heman continued, “For all of these reasons and more, I would like to give your lord a small token of my thanks. All I ask is that you relay my regards to Lord Richter, and tell him that I am the first of the freed prisoners that would like to accept his offer to stay in the village. I am sure

that he will be happy to have this item.” When Heman finished his speech, he took a cloth-wrapped bundle from inside his shirt and handed it to Teyin.

Caulder silently held up a hand to the guard, halting him from moving forward. At the same time, he looked at Richter and Terrod. The two Companions looked at each other again, sharing a moment of nonverbal communication, before the chaos seed gave a short nod.

“Walk forward with what he gave you, Teyin,” Caulder commanded firmly. “We will discuss your breach of protocol later, but for now, your *friend* stays where he is.”

The guard walked forward, but Richter’s gaze remained glued to the Heman. He didn’t know what was happening, but he was sure it was something important. The feeling had faded somewhat, not like it had lessened, but more like he had gotten used to it somehow. The chaos seed was still acutely aware of it, but it was no longer distracting. Weakened or not, Richter wasn’t about to take his eyes off of the man until he knew what was going on.

Caulder took the package from his subordinate and unwrapped it. Sitting on a dirty scrap of cloth was a foot-long length of black metal. At the end of the short rod was a crystalline spike of dark green crystal. Richter’s identify Talent triggered.



You have found:	Attack: 2-3
Wand of Cursed Stumbling	Durability: 74/102
	Item Class: Unusual
	Quality: Superb
	Weight: 0.5 kg
	Traits: This wand fires a ball of magical energy that explodes on contact. Anyone within 5 yards suffers from the Curse of Stumbling causing a -23% loss of Agility. This curse lasts for 30 minutes.
	Charges: 217/217

Richter raised one eyebrow. This thing was no cheap trinket. Agility not only determined how quickly someone could move, but also affected their ability to land and dodge attacks. Being able to fire off several balls from the wand could seriously hamper a small army. He didn't like the "cursed" part, but he supposed if it was bad for the wielder, it would have been called the "Cursed Wand of Stumbling" not the "Wand of Cursed Stumbling," or just "Wand of Stumbling." At least he hoped so.

It would be kind of pointless to create a trap and then advertise that it was cursed. People wouldn't ever equip it. On the other hand, Richter knew

from his own Profession Talent tree that it was possible to “mislabel” enchanted items. His own *Identify Enchantments* Talent was rank two though, so it should be able to appropriately describe most anything he found. Unless whoever created this item had purchased rank three of a Talent that obscured the item prompt...

Gah! He shook his head. He could get lost down that rabbit hole forever. There was only one way to really know if the item was a trap and that was to pick it up. He wouldn't have someone else pick it up for him though. He started to wave Caulder over, but then had another thought, “Make him pick it up,” Richter ordered quietly, pointing at Heman. “And make him fire it into the ground.”

The sergeant nodded and walked over to Heman. Caulder paused for a moment, then handed over the wand. After repeating the instructions, the man looked off into the mist, searching. Richter realized that Heman suspected he was near. The half-gnome did as he was ordered though. He held the wand out and discharged it. A glow built in the crystal for two seconds before a green ball of light shot forward. When it struck the ground to the man's right, it expanded for fifteen feet in every direction. The verdant glow hung in the air for a second before disappearing. Nothing else occurred.

Richter used his Talent again and saw that the single use had

consumed twenty-eight charges. Not overly surprising for an AoE spell that quartered an enemy's attributes. This truly was a princely gift. It had to be worth hundreds of gold. He couldn't help but wonder how a freed slave had gotten hold of such a powerful wand. He waved both Terrod and Caulder over.

"There is something about this guy," Richter said quietly. "I'm not sure what it is, but it makes me feel something. The only other time I experience it, is when I get close to the Dungeon." Terrod's eyes widened. There was a great deal he didn't know about that latest addition to the village, but he did know Dungeons were dangerous. If his lord thought this man was similar in some way, then he took the possible threat seriously. Caulder also picked up on his lord's intensity, but he was the perfect sergeant. He didn't speak unless he had something helpful to add. That being said, he was ready to kill as soon as his lord gave the word.

"Is this a problem I need to deal with, my lord?" Terrod asked. His hand tightened around the hilt of his sword.

Richter sighed, "I don't know. Have you ever heard of Dungeons... becoming people or something like that?"

Terrod shook his head and then looked over at Heman in consternation. The captain had seen many things in his life, and more often

than not, the unknown brought danger. Part of him wanted to kill this man and be done with it, but he knew Richter would not approve. He loved that his lord cared for the “right” of things, but it also made it damnably hard to keep him safe.

The three of them stood there for another minute, until Caulder broke the silence, “Though I plan on having serious words with Teyin, I do know the man well. He and I served together for years in Leaf’s Crossing before we both came to join the village. I still plan to make him run in full armor until he throws up, but Teyin has a level head. For him to speak up for this man, means something, at least in my book, my lord. I also... have a good feeling about this Heman. Perhaps it is worth at least speaking to him before you make a decision.”

Richter looked at him in surprise. When he had first met Caulder, he had shaken Richter down for a few coins with a smile on his face. Despite that, the guard had been very helpful. Since coming to the village, Richter had seen another side of him: a no-nonsense, badass, tough-as-nails sergeant. Hearing him advise restraint, after already having chewed out Teyin no less, was surprising. “*You* think we should give this guy a chance? Before Sumiko can test his intentions?”

A look of confusion crossed over Caulder’s face for a moment, but then the indecision passed and he nodded, “I cannot say exactly why, my

lord, but I have a good feeling about this man. Also, you are surrounded by your guards. If he shows any hostility, we can end his life in a moment.”

Richter looked at Terrod and, after a few moments, the captain nodded in agreement. That was good enough for him. The chaos seed turned his gaze back to Heman and focused. The mists pulled back in a corridor between himself and the half-gnome. Richter walked forward with his sergeant and captain walking right behind him. When he was in front of Heman, he held his hand out flat.

Heman smiled broadly at being able to see more of the world around him and handed the wand over. Richter placed it in his bag. Reaching out a hand again, he said formally, “Well met, Heman. My name is Richter and I am the lord of this village. This is truly a wonderful gift, and I accept it in the same sentiment in which it was given.”

Heman face took on a slightly pained expression, but he also reached out and clasped Richter’s wrist. “Thank you, Lord Richter. I mean no offense, but my name, it’s pronounced, ‘he-man.’”

Richter blinked. When he had just greeted the man, he’d pronounced it “him-in,” and the whole time he’d been thinking, this guy’s name sounds like “hymen.” What really made him pause though, was the fact that Heman had used a contraction. He’d said “it’s.” Almost no one did that. The only

ones who did, in fact, were Richter's own friends who had begun adopting some of his own manners of speech. When you added that to the man's name...

Carefully, Richter asked, "Where is your name from? I have not heard it before."

Heman gave an easy laugh, "Yes. I come from quite far away. You could say I am named after a mighty warrior."

"Far away," Richter repeated nodding, "but where exactly?" Everyone noticed the intensity of his question, Heman included. While the man was confused, he also grew still when he saw Caulder and Terrod look at him with menacing intent.

"Ahh," he began, "I do not think you would believe me, my lord, but I will answer. I come from a planet called Earth."

The world came to a standstill as soon as Richter heard that word. Terrod looked at him askance, wondering what his lord wanted him to do. Caulder's eyes just remained glued to Heman. Whatever initial positive feeling he had had about the man wouldn't stop him from taking his head if Richter ordered it.

For long heartbeats, they all stood there. A single droplet of sweat beaded on Heman's brow before rolling down the side of his face. He didn't

know what he had done, but he was fairly certain this forest lord was about to order his death.

But then, Richter smiled, “Let me welcome you again, Heman. I’m always happy to meet a master of the universe.”

The man’s eyes widened in shock and comprehension, as he realized the man he owed his freedom to was a chaos seed as well. With awe in his voice, he whispered, “By the Power of Grayskull!”

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Richter's mind was racing. He was looking at another chaos seed! Questions swirled in his head like a hurricane. Where was he from? Was the man a gamer that had played The Land? Had he even come from Earth? Had he died back on Earth? Had he died here in The Land? Was the experience the same as what Richter went through? Could he trust him? Should he even risk it? Why hadn't his Analyze skill shown his race as "Chaos Seed?" Richter checked again, but he still just saw half-gnome/half-human. Did that mean his skill couldn't detect other people from Earth? That thought made his blood run cold. Did that mean he might have already met other chaos seeds and didn't even know it?

The man was a chaos seed. A chaos seed! Richter led Heman through the mists to a table where they sat and talked for the next several hours. Despite feeling more at ease than he had expected to, Richter was still hesitant to share too much. Even more than his mind being flooded with

questions, he felt overwhelmed by the tumult of emotions rising up inside of him.

There was excitement at having finally found another member of his race. Also, an almost painful curiosity to find out what this man knew. He felt pity that this Heman had been forced into slavery. Above all else though, he felt caution. Richter knew what his people were capable of doing when push came to shove. He'd thought many times on what coming to The Land would do to humans. What the brutal planet might drive them to do. Or worse, what dark impulses The Land might let them express. Richter psychically called out to Alma, but she was hunting and out of range. He kept his expression neutral, but prepared himself for anything.

He talked of his early days in The Land, but avoided too many specifics about his travels. Heman felt no such compunction.

The first thing he explained was his name.

“When I got here, I woke up in a pitch-black tunnel. I had been playing The Land and had found this new dungeon. When I went inside, everything went dark and I must have lost consciousness. When I came to I remember calling out, ‘Where am I?’ It must have triggered something because a prompt appeared asking my name.”

The half-gnome sighed heavily, “I didn’t even think about it when I

responded with my gamer handle, 'He-man20\$7,' the same tag I had always used when I gamed. It got shortened to 'Heman,' and there was no way for me to change it. Which reminds me, how did you know my name before I told you?"

"I have a skill that allows me to know people's names." Richter responded simply.

"I wish I had been so fortunate," Heman said ruefully.

"You still thought it was a game when you woke up?" Richter prompted, getting the conversation back on track.

"Didn't you?"

"At first," Richter equivocated. He didn't elaborate that 'at first' had only lasted about three minutes. That was when a flying imp had kicked him in the eye and made it clear that The Land was not a game. The bastard had even enunciated every word to make sure that Richter got the point. "What happened next?"

A look of pain and deep-seated anger crossed Heman's face, "What happened next is that I died. Again and again. Four times in total... I think." His voice grew haunted and he looked off into the distance as he relived those early days. "There was no light. I had to just pick a direction at random and start walking. After running into a low-hanging stalactite and

losing an eye,” Richter’s mouth dropped open and Heman just nodded gravely before continuing, “it became painfully clear that this wasn’t a game anymore. I had heard rumors on the message boards of people disappearing, but I thought it was just a digital myth.”

He laughed without humor. “After that, I began to crawl. I went for hours before I started hearing it. The clacking.” His voice dropped even lower, “It started as a low buzz, but *Clack-clack. Clack-clack.*” One finger started tapping on the table that they were sitting at. It didn’t appear that he was aware of it. “They get louder when they’re getting closer to making a kill, you see.” He said it faster this time, “*Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack-clack-clack.*” Heman started shuddering, and he looked at Richter with pain in his eyes, “They ate me. I never found out exactly what they were. From what I felt as I tried to fight them off, I know they were bugs of some kind. I know their bodies had three segments and six legs. I remember the way it felt to have those sharp legs crawl over me. Sharp little legs like daggers, but it’s their mouths that I remember. That *clacking* was the sound of their pincers snapping together. They were as large as my leg, but their mouths had to be small. They bit me again and again and again. They ate me piece by small piece.” He looked off into the distance, lost in the horrible remembrance.

Heman stopped talking and just sat there. Richter didn’t know what

to say. He had been through his own horrible deaths. Being eaten by wolves had been emotionally scarring. From what he was hearing though, Heman had had it worse. There was no real point in comparing the two experiences. There were some things that were just so awful, there were no “right” words to say and make it better. Experiences like that were proof that death could be a blessing, a release from a pain that could not be endured. Richter had often wondered if the fact that he could be reborn would one day become a curse.

They just sat there for a minute before Heman continued, “When I was reborn, I just laid on the stone, sobbing in the dark. I don’t know how long. Part of me just wanted to give up, but ultimately, hunger and thirst made me start moving again. I don’t know if I respawned in the same place. You have no idea the fear I felt when I started making my way through the tunnels again. Every scrape of rock sounded like that horrifying *clack-clack*.”

Heman forced a false smile onto his face. “The good news is, I didn’t run into the *clack* monsters again.” He sighed heavily, “This time, I lost my footing on a graveled slope and fell off a cliff. Not very far. Just far enough to break both of my ankles. Have you ever died from dehydration?” Richter shook his head in sympathy. “It wasn’t all bad. I learned new things. Did you know that banging your head against a rock is an extremely inefficient

way to kill yourself? You just pass out and then wake up with a horrible headache. I'm fairly certain a fever set in before the end. My body felt like it was on fire, but at least it hastened my death." Heman's tone was distant, analytical.

The man gave another deep sigh and visibly shook himself to dispel his dark mood. He plastered another fake smile on his face. "When I was born again, at least this time I had a direction. Before I had left during my second life, I had arranged rocks into an arrow shape. I didn't know if I would come back to the same location, but I figured it was worth a shot. Have you died?" he asked.

Richter nodded, understanding the man's pain.

"Did you come back to the same place?"

"In the forest," Richter said nodding again.

An expression that Richter couldn't read passed over Heman's face, there and gone in an instant. Then the man chuckled, "Your Luck stat must be off the charts. I used to dream of the sun. Hmph. I am happy that you were not condemned to a lightless hell as I was." Richter placed a hand on Heman's shoulder. The man looked at him gratefully. "As I was saying, I had a direction now. I chose to travel the same way and resolved to not to fall this time. At least it was away from the bugs.

“It took what felt like forever, but I retraced my steps and made it down the slope. I kept walking, no food, no water, no hope, but then I saw it. The most beautiful thing I had ever seen. It was light. The light of a single torch.” His face grew pensive at that point, “I was near death at that point, I think. I tried to call out, but my throat was too dry. I’m pretty sure I collapsed.”

“When I finally came to, I was in a cage. There were others with me. It turns out that I had been captured by a small tribe of gnolls.” He chuckled fatalistically. “I’d never been happier.”

“They saved you? Gnolls?” Richter asked. He hadn’t come across any of the hyena humanoids yet, but Terrod had said they were a vicious species.

“They had caught us for food,” Heman responded.

This guy’s story was insanely depressing. Richter almost didn’t want to ask more questions but couldn’t help himself, “They killed you?”

“No,” Heman told him, shaking his head. “The gnolls butchered one prisoner a day, but only a week later, they were attacked by a powerful goblin clan.”

“The Ash Stalker clan?” Richter asked. They were the same goblin nation he’d stolen the Bloodstone and liberated Heman and the other slaves

from.

“Yes,” Heman confirmed. “They killed the gnolls easily. In the confusion, I got free and made my way into the gnoll chief’s hut. That’s where I found the wand I gave you. I concealed it and was captured soon afterwards. Over the next several months, the goblins moved me to various locations. The message was the same in each place, however. Work or die. I chose to work. It turned out that I had quite a knack for mining, and I advanced my skill quickly. It is amazing how good you can get at something when it’s all you do every day, except for the four hours allotted for sleep.”

This guy was seriously depressing him. Richter tried to keep the story moving, “How did you hide the wand from the goblins? I’m sure they would have taken such a powerful magic item.”

“Ahhhh, I would rather not discuss that, Lord Richter.”

Richter looked at Heman in curiosity, then his face took on a sympathetic cant. He keistered it, the Enchanter realized. He resisted the impulse to sniff his hand, but resolved to wash up soon. As his granddaddy used to say, never trust money from a prison wallet. For now, he had another question, “How did you advance your personal level to seven if you’ve been a slave the whole time?”

“I received six thousand Experience Points from leveling my Mining

skill. The goblin overseers had the capability to monitor the skills of others. Most likely similar to your own skill, Lord Richter. They began taking me on hunting expeditions with them to increase my personal level and make me a more efficient worker. They had special goblin leaders that could give me a portion of everyone's experience. Each time I leveled, they carefully monitored where I allocated my points. That is why so many points went into my Strength attribute."

Richter nodded, processing what he had been told. While he felt sympathy for Heman's sad story, what really occupied his mind was the fact that the goblins had enough war leaders that they could power level slaves. That was not something he had wanted to hear. A strong war leader could increase the power of the troops he led by a massive amount. The fact that he might have just picked a fight with the Ash Stalker clan, a kingdom that numbered in the tens or even hundreds of thousands, weighed heavily upon him.

Another thought was bothering Richter. Maybe Heman hadn't been power leveled just because he was a valuable worker. Had he missed another collaborator? Had Heman's anger at the fourteen men and women Richter had judged just been an act? He had to know. "You got along well with the goblins then?" Richter asked lightly.

Heman's face grew sorrowful. "I know what they did to my fellow

prisoners. I'm not blind. I asked myself many times if I should have stood up for the abused." He looked ashamed, "You may call me a coward, but I was just another slave. I was just trying to survive, by working hard. I couldn't risk dying and going back... into the dark."

Richter watched Heman for a second, then he realized he couldn't judge this man for having done what he had to do. Dying was no small matter, even if you were reborn. Richter also hadn't factored in that the other chaos seed hadn't been able to change his respawn point. Richter had only been able to change his own because he'd become Master of a Place of Power. He had no idea what the rules were for changing spawning points. It just wasn't his place to judge Heman for what he'd had to do to survive.

Richter put a hand on Heman's shoulder, "You're safe now. Well, as safe as anyone else in this village. We'll speak more soon, but I have a great deal to do to ensure our continuing safety."

"I completely understand, Lord Richter. I had only hoped to meet someone higher up in the guard. Meeting you is beyond expectations. And meeting someone from home... that means the world. I hope we can talk some more tomorrow?"

"Of course," Richter replied, standing up. He waved Caulder over and told him to take Heman back to the other freed prisoners. One more

question occurred to him though, “It sounds like you’ve been in The Land for a few months. What month was it back home when you left?”

“February,” Heman answered. Richter looked at him in confusion. That didn’t make any sense. He’d been taken in May and he’d been in The Land for almost five months. Unless time moved differently once you were transported here. Maybe months and days translated differently. It had been the year 2037 when he’d entered the Castle of Transition.

“What year?” Richter called after him.

Heman stopped with a quizzical expression on his face, “2044.” Then he started walking again, leaving Richter staring after him in disbelief.

Seven years, Richter thought. It’s been seven years. Seven years at least, he realized. If time moved slower here in The Land, and Heman had been here for at least half the time that he had... fifteen years or twenty years could have passed on Earth. Everyone he knew back home would have moved on. His friends and family could be dead. Richter searched his emotions about this, but as always when he thought about home, there was only a nondescript dull feeling. He paused for a moment, thinking there was something about that, but then someone called his name and the worry faded from his mind.

Richter left the training ground soon after, and spent the rest of the

day in the Forge. In addition to making more enchanted arms and armor, he advanced three of his enchantments.

*Congratulations! You have reached **Rank II** in the Level I enchantment: **Life Aura***

*Congratulations! You have reached **Rank III** in the Level I enchantment: **Life Defense***

*Congratulations! You have reached **Rank III** in the Level I enchantment: **Multishot***

It was the last one that was the true boon. Ranking up in *Multishot* brought a wonderful idea to his mind. Namely, using his dual enchant Talent to mix *Multishot* and some other form of attack enchantment. The first he tried was *Freeze*.

He prepared ten arrowheads and then enchanted them up to the fourth rank in *Multishot* and the first rank in *Freeze*. There was a slightly unpleasant surprise when he discovered that using a dual enchantment reduced the number of arrowheads he could enchant at once. In the past, he'd been able to enspell ten at a time using only one dose of captured souls. This time, only five of the ten were imbued with magic and the others remained simple high steel. Still, it was enough for his experiment.

Richter had the five attached to already-prepared arrow shafts and left

the forge with them. To his delight, they worked like a charm. After firing one, it shimmered in the air and became four different projectiles. All four left icy splotches on the cliff they impacted against. The cost to create a dual enchantment was expensive, both in powdered crystal as well as captured souls, but it opened up so many wonderful opportunities that Richter's mind started spinning.

Once he finished enchanting there wasn't much light left in the day. There was still enough time to go to the Scholar's Hut though. As instructed, the meidon sprites that had learned new spells were there. It took the last hours of daylight, but Richter was able to create spellbooks for all three new spells. He also finally learned a Life spell that Isabella had been gifted with before. After Bartle had copied the tomes, he absorbed the magic and made it his own.

Congratulations! You have learned: **Weak Detect Life**. Allows the caster to see a faint glow from creatures possessing Life in its many forms, including the animated dead, at a maximum distance of 20 yards. This spell even allows the caster to detect creatures through walls, though the stealth capabilities of certain creatures may stymie this magic. This is a spell of Life Magic, level 1. Cost: 44 mana. Duration: 8 minutes. Range: Self. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: 1 minute.

Congratulations! You have learned: **Weak Life's Radiance**. Creates a 5-yard radius of Life energy around the caster. All healing spells are 5% more effective to anyone within the boundaries of this spell. Life creatures are 5% stronger and Death creatures are 5% weaker. This is a spell of Life Magic, level 1. Cost: 38 mana. Duration: 5 minutes. Range: Self. Cast Time: 2 seconds. Cooldown: 18 minutes.

Congratulations! You have learned: **Weak Honed Air**. Creates an area of extremely compressed air around your weapon. Increases the lethal distance of your weapon by 3 inches. Enemies struck with this extended radius will not trigger enchantments in your weapon. This is a spell of Air Magic, level 1. Cost: 31 mana. Duration: 20 minutes. Range: self. Cast Time: 2 seconds. Cooldown: 18 minutes.

Congratulations! You have learned: **Weak Voice Displacement**. Allows the caster to make his voice appear to come from a different location up to 10 yards away. This is a spell of Air Magic, level 1. Cost: 17 mana. Duration: 12 minutes. Range: self. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.

With all that done, Richter finally headed back to his room. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

CHAPTER 54 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



Richter awoke to a creature flying above his head.

“It has happened. It is time!”

Richter coughed as pixie dust fell in his mouth, “Wha- Elora?”

Exactly what part of her body did that dust come from again?

“Yes,” she replied happily. The piccolo sounds of her voice were filled with joy. “The Quickening fruit has matured. The tree is singing and so are my children! Come. You don’t want to miss the dawn!”

Still somewhat confused, Richter was nevertheless caught up in his Companion’s joy. Alma was dislodged from her usual spot of sleeping on his chest as he sat up. She sent him her typical psychic complaints over having been woken up too early. Something about her not having a Belt of Sustenance that decreased her sleep needs and that he was a horrible and cruel master, followed by the obligatory demand that he scratch the scales down the middle of her back. After acceding to the last, both Richter and the

dragonling got out of bed.

Elora somehow tapped her foot impatiently while hovering in midair as he splashed some water on his face. She started audibly huffing when he put a dollop of what passed for toothpaste in The Land on his finger and scrubbed. He would not walk around with stank in his mouth, no matter how wondrous of an event was occurring. An event he still didn't understand. A quick swish and spit later, and they were on their way.

She flew fast enough that he had to jog to keep up with her. While he moved, he downed a Potion of Clarity from his Bag of Holding. The guards stationed in the catacombs clapped their fists to their chests in salute as he sped by. As he exited the caverns, Richter was greeted by a dark sky that was just beginning to lighten. The bluish moon Aquiel hung prominently in the heavens. East and closer to the horizon Richter could make out the nearly pitch black moon, Nevuur. It was smaller but still always seemed ominous to him; its purple striations gave it the appearance of a desiccated corpse. Despite it being in view, the fading night was perfect and beautiful. He could feel the wind caress his skin and he took a moment to watch the few clouds float across the sky. There was a moisture in the air, but it was still pleasantly warm from yesterday's summer sun.

Elora didn't pause to take in the view and continued flying west towards the meadow. She stayed at the same elevation, soon dozens of yards

above the earth. Queen she may be, but in that moment, she was just a young woman who was excited beyond belief. She waved at him impatiently, urging him to go faster. In a world that required him to sentence men and women to death, to fight for his very survival and to wash blood from his hands on a daily basis, Richter surrendered to the moment. He gave a laugh of pure joy and sprinted after her. She laughed as well, the sound like the tinkling of glass bells, and streaked off, leaving a trail of glowing dust behind her multicolored wings.

In no time at all, he was in the northern meadow and running towards the Quickening. Its thick white leaves were shifting in the wind and Richter could see snatches of color peeking through. The pixies were flying in circles under the canopy, as excited as their queen. Elora had already crossed under the boughs of the celestial tree.

Hisako's army and the meidon sprites were arrayed in the meadow around the Quickening. The sprites all shared a deep bond with nature and were inspired by the Quickening, but they were in absolute awe of the pixies. The small creatures were the other half of their souls, and every sprite was born with a yearning for a union with one of them, a yearning for the meidon.

As Richter got closer, he realized that the leaves of the Quickening were moving more than the wind could account for, and some were shifting

in different directions. As soon as he crossed under the hanging tree limbs, he heard it. A faint tinkling that came from above. The silver undersides of the Quickening leaves were striking together, and somehow, they were making music. The pixies flew in intricate and opposing circles around the tree, their voices raised in song.

*Know This! You are witness to the **Song of Celestial Ripening**. The Quickening, the bonded tree of Queen Elora, has finally borne mature fruit. For the first time in several ages, the silver spheres of a Quickening shine their light upon The Land. The celestial pixies hear the chiming of the bells that vibrate in many realities. It will grow louder as the first light of the sun gets closer to shining upon the Quickening's magnificence. Any who hear this song will be more likely to be successful in their endeavors for the next day and the Universe itself will help them make the best choices.*

Richter stood there, witness to beauty and poetry. Before long, the sun rose and he watched a miracle happen before his eyes. The first rays of light fell on its white leaves and the Quickening absorbed the power and promise of a new day. Overnight it had drank every wavelength of starlight that fell upon it, and now, with the golden rays of sunlight powering it as well, the tree came alive. The intricate whorls in the bark of the trunk became outlined in silver white light and for the first time Richter could see beyond a doubt that they were actually part of a language. He could not read

it, proving that the words were of a higher language, most likely celestial, as his Gift of Tongues ability could translate almost anything else. As he watched, the dark silver fruit of the Quickening descended on thin branches. Each limb held one of the precious pods. There were easily more than a hundred in the first few moments and more descended every second.

“As is only fitting, my lord,” Elora’s sweet voice came from behind him, “you shall have the first and best.”

She led him to the trunk while her children sang and danced above her. Then she raised her own beautiful voice, light yet soulful, and sang to the tree itself. The light seeping through the whorls on the bark brightened and the octuple-helix that formed the trunk began to move. A last and final fruit descended from inside of the tree’s hollow center. It was half again as large as the others. It was attached to a single thin silver branch which flowed towards him. Richter raised both hands in supplication and the gift was delivered unto him.

<p>You have been bestowed: First Fruit of the</p>	<p>Durability: 138/138</p> <p>Herb Class: Legendary</p> <p>Herb Quality: Celestial Pure</p> <p>Weight: 2.0 kg</p> <p>Traits: This is the first fruit produced by a Quickening.</p>
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Quickening

Anyone consuming the soft silver flesh of this fruit will be forever changed by its celestial nature. The full effects can only be known after consumption. This first fruit will surpass the effects of other fruit by 10x.

In addition to the prompt showing the fruit's actual stats, more notifications appeared in his vision.

*Congratulations! You have been honored with the **First Fruit** borne of a new Quickening. The celestial nature of this unique item will change you forever. From each generation of fruit created, you may enjoy the blessing of one of the fruits by consuming its flesh. Other uses of celestial fruit may be discovered in time. Normally, a Quickening bears fruit twice per year, but the bonus of your Life Mastery increases the resource growth of your village by +30%. Coupled with the benefits of being cared for by a celestial pixie, your Quickening will bear fruit four times per year. Truly you have been blessed, Richter of the Mist Village.*

There was nothing more. It seemed to him that such an amazing object, like the *legendary* fruit he was holding in his hands, deserved more pomp and circumstance. Apparently, the Universe disagreed. Or perhaps it was merely waiting for him to eat.

Richter had almost no doubt that consuming the fruit would be a good thing, but he still had a niggling thread of worry. Too many times things had not been exactly as they appeared in The Land. He would have felt better if his Herb Lore skill could have told him the specific effects of eating the fruit, but the powerful nature of the tree precluded that.

Elora headed off any further worry, flying in front of him. With a sure smile on her small face, she spoke, “You can trust me and my bonded tree, my lord. Please.” Saying nothing else, she grabbed hold of his free hand. With a flutter of her multicolored wings, she guided his fingers to the stem on top of the silver fruit.

The exterior of the fruit was a gleaming silver. No one could ever mistake it for plain silver though because it was warm to the touch. Strong reflections could be seen in its smooth surface and there were faint whirls beneath the surface of the metal. It was perfectly spherical, except for a small depression on top that a stem extended out from. Richter had honestly been wondering how to go about eating it, because it felt like a lump of cool metal in his hand. At Elora’s urging, he pulled and twisted the stem. More silver light leaked from the top of the fruit until it came free completely. A beam the color of the precious metal bathed his face, bringing with it feelings of peace and contentment. With the stem gone, the outer silver rind fell away. The inner fruit was revealed and celestial light cascaded across all present.

He would never fully be able to describe the experience as it seemed to transcend words, but it felt like acceptance and joy. It was the first time he'd gotten a one hundred on a quiz. It was the home run he'd hit as a child. The ball had flown so far! It was the perfect breast that had unscrambled, for just a moment, on channel ninety-nine. It was slow-dancing with a girl that liked him and feeling her melt into his arms. It was watching an eclipse with his dad while they ate ice cream. It was flipping a pancake for the first time and not making a mess. It was a sunrise after a nighttime hike. It was drinking too much with friends and laughing in a perfect moment that could never come again.

The feeling was like every happy and joyous moment he'd ever felt, but stripped of the judgements, worries and concerns that had always plagued him. He understood, in that moment, the purity of good. It was a celebration of life, but also an acceptance of its imperfections. It was seeing how those "impurities" were actually as vital and necessary as the protrusions on puzzle pieces. They allowed every moment and every joy to fit into a greater whole. That was what he was a part of, what they were all a part of, a unity.

Then the light began to fade, and Richter could clearly see the luminescent fruit. The skin was completely translucent. Inside of it was a slowly moving swirl of light. Globes that looked like silver planets revolved around a silver corona in the center. The light played across Richter's skin

and beckoned to him.

Nothing perfect can last long in this dimension. Now that the inner flesh of the Quickening fruit has been exposed, it must be consumed quickly or be lost forever!

The chaos seed did not wait any longer. His teeth bit into the fruit and the small universe of power it contained flowed into him!

*Know This! You have consumed the flesh of the **First Fruit of a Quickening**. By eating this Unique herb, you are now bound to this Quickening. The celestial tree is powerful, but benevolent. It only wishes to maximize the potential of all creatures. You will now begin to receive Unique quests associated with furthering the Quickening's nature. These will offer opportunities and items that otherwise could not be obtained. They may also alter your relationship with certain factions.*

You have been offered a Quest: **Potential for Greatness I**

Feed the fruit of the Quickening to ten different Professionals. Only Professionals with a “Good” or “Neutral” alignment may safely consume the fruit of the Quickening.

Current Count: 1/10

Reward: Unknown

Penalty for Failure or Rejection of Quest: None

Do you accept? Yes or No?

Richter barely thought about it as he chose “Yes.” The juice of the fruit continued to pour down his throat and, it felt like, into his veins. More prompts appeared.

*You have consumed the **First Fruit of a Quickening**. This has infused your body with celestial power. You shall never be the same again. Your Attributes will be adjusted and any children that you have will also benefit from boons that you receive. Any further points invested in these stats will benefit from this modifier. The consequences of this action may never be fully known, but there are decisions to be made now. Due to your exposure to the Song of Celestial Ripening, you may allow the Universe to choose what it believes to be in your best interests. Be warned, the will and whim of the Universe is unfathomable. Do you wish the Universe to decide for you? Yes or No?*

The mention of his children grabbed his attention but only momentarily, as pure energy continued to flow into him. Focusing was difficult, but the question of whether to let the “Universe” decide for him hovered insistently in his gaze. Richter didn’t like the idea of relinquishing

control, he never had, but he also didn't like being a blind moron. The songs of the pixies were powerful magic. It seemed to him that disregarding the magic of friendly celestial beings as he made choices about consuming a celestial fruit would be a bad move. He selected "Yes" and hoped for the best.

The prompts continued to cascade.

Know This! One of your Primary Attributes has been chosen in accordance with your true desire to be increased. This boost is normally 1%, but for consuming the First Fruit you gain a +10% boon. Your chosen stat is:
Intelligence.

Adjusted Intelligence: 72.6

Effective Intelligence: 73

Richter's mana points soared from seven hundred and eight to seven hundred and seventy-eight. As always, he searched himself to see if he could detect a change in his intellect, but he felt nothing. He didn't have time to focus on it as more windows appeared.

Know This! One of your Secondary Attributes has been chosen in accordance with your true desire to be increased. Your chosen stat is:
Resilience. *The boost for this Secondary Attribute is normally 10%, but for consuming the First Fruit you gain a +100% boon.*

*Know This! You have increased a Secondary Attribute: **Resilience**. In every life trials arise, and many fail their tests. This Attribute is a measure of your ability to withstand the worst of conditions before succumbing to death. You may cling to the mortal coil with spectral fingers, holding onto life for a scant few additional moments than should be allowed by gods and demons. You will be able to withstand the blows of fate, with your head held high, bleeding and bruised and pale. You have no guarantee for success, but by birth and will your own Resilience has risen to +3.6. The base Resilience of most people in The Land is +1.*

Your base Resilience of +1.0 is affected by several factors:

*1) **Endurance**: Your Primary Attribute increases your Resilience by +0.35*

*2) **Resolute**: The Quality you gained after your first death has increased your Resilience by +0.15*

*3) **Tortured, but Unbroken**: Your ill-advised interaction with Auditor Nexus resulted in months of perceived pain. Only a fool would threaten a being with powers akin to a demigod in their own domain, but a long-lived fool may be the most resilient creature in existence. The experience has increased your Resilience by +0.3*

*4) **First Fruit of the Quickening**: +100% to Resilience*

Total Resilience: +3.6 (base +1.8)

The torrent of power began to slacken a bit, allowing Richter greater control over his conscious thoughts. He was still at the mercy of the celestial power, but the initial burst had been like standing next to a frozen waterfall when it first thawed and now he was merely being swept along in the stream rather than buffeted by it.

As his reason returned, he reflected upon the choices that had been made for him. The fact that the Universe had chosen to increase Resilience, and not the other secondary attributes he was aware of like his new Creativity which would clearly be a boon, was somewhat disturbing. It was true that his stubbornness, a trait that had been termed by others as his tendency to be a “raging asshole,” had been both a blessing and a curse in his lifetime.

For good or ill, it had definitely been necessary since coming to The Land. Death and pain had been constant companions, perhaps even more than Sion and Terrod. He could see the wisdom in increasing his Resilience, but he worried what it boded for his future... Then he saw the bit about Nexus, and his worry was replaced by the greatest annoyance he’d ever experienced in life. That walking anal pimple actually *was* kind of a god.

More notifications flowed.

Know This! Consuming the fruit of the Quickening increases the affinity of one of your skills. The choice given to all is:

- 1) Choose a specific known skill and receive a 1% boost to the current affinity.
- 2) Choose a known skill at random and receive a 5% boost to the current affinity.
- 3) Choose a random skill, known or unknown, and receive a 10% boost to the current affinity

*Know This! For consuming the First Fruit, all of the above bonuses are increased by **10x***

Know This! Increasing any affinity above 100% will trigger an automatic increase in skill level. This increase will continue, decreasing the total affinity by 10% per level, until your affinity is 100% or less.

Know This! Increasing any affinity above 50% will trigger an automatic awakening of the skill, awarding the recipient skill level 1.

In accordance with your true desire, the Universe has chosen to increase a random skill affinity by 100%

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Cloud Running**. Few outside of the Sky Monks of Yunfei Monastery have ever learned this skill. The feline monks which call the monastery their home, the Fordij, may have some passing resemblance to snow leopards, but they are far from animals. Their culture is among the richest and most venerable in The Land. Their martial*

arts make them a force on par with almost any fighters in The Land, but what they are most known for is the skill Cloud Running. Focusing their chi, they can glide on the air for short periods of time. True masters of this skill can climb to the highest heights with nothing but air beneath them. **+0.25s of aerial glide time. +2% strength of jumps.**

Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 2, 3, ..., and 10 in **Cloud Running**. +2.5 seconds of aerial glide time. +20% strength from jumps.

Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in: **Cloud Running**. You may now jump upon non-solid surfaces. Using pure gaseous mediums to jump again increases the Stamina required by 200%. Other mediums drain less Stamina depending on their density, viscosity and other factors.

You have received 1,250 (base 2,000 \times 1.25 \times 0.5) bonus experience for reaching level 10 in the skill: **Cloud Running**.

XP deficit remaining: **-98,783**

Enjoy these gifts, Richter of the Mist Village. You could have chosen many different paths that would not have allowed this celestial tree to bear fruit in The Land. Your unselfish choice to allow Elora to bond to the Quickening has not been forgotten. The Quickening itself is a being of pure energy that normally does not directly notice the lives around it, but in this moment in

time, you are thanked.

Had the tree just thanked him?

Consuming the fruit of the Quickening is the first step in evolving your own nature. In all the realities and dimensions of The Land, a celestial chaos seed would be a formidable monster...

And what the hell does that mean, Richter asked himself. The flow of energy had finally ceased. Nothing was left of the glowing silver fruit, not skin and not seeds. Behind him he heard Hisako speak, “Watasachi wi forsuto ne kanza shimateru.” Every other sprite reverently repeated the phrase. Richter’s Gift of Tongues ability triggered, ‘Heavenly Forest, we thank you for your love and gifts.’ It seemed appropriate, so the chaos seed said the words himself with all solemnity.

Then a massive grin broke out over his face. He was surrounded both by comrades who had stood by him through fire and blood and hundreds of celestial fruits. It was time to show his people just how smart they’d been in choosing him as a friend!

CHAPTER 55 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



Richter was about to reach for another fruit when a glimmer caught his eye. Looking down, he saw the forgotten silver rind of the First Fruit. With everything that had happened, he'd completely forgotten the outer shell of the swirling silver universe he had just consumed. He picked it up and examined it.

<p>You have found: Truesilver Rind of the First Fruit</p>	<p>Durability: 138/138</p> <p>Item Class: Rare</p> <p>Weight: 0.1 kg</p> <p>Traits: This rind is from the First Fruit of the Quickening. Comprised of truesilver, it is anathema to abyssal creatures. It is also deadly to those of the demonic and hellish planes. Evil creatures will not be able to stand its touch. A smith of sufficient skill might be able to forge this rind and others of its type into an ingot of truesilver.</p>
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What a weapon that could make!

If I ever thought that this tree was not amazing, I take it back, Richter thought with awe. Truesilver had been one of the rarest and most precious metals one could find when he'd thought The Land was only a game. It was actually a bit of a running joke to send noobs on werewolf hunts armed with silver-tipped crossbow bolts. The precious metal did absolutely nothing. One werewolf king had actually been reported to wear thick silver chains as “bling” while he slaughtered ill-prepared adventurers.

Where those stories came from was truesilver. This gleaming metal would lay low vampires, ghouls, weres and any number of malignant creatures. He'd even heard that light reflected from truesilver could damage certain monsters, though he'd always doubted that particular tale. Seemed overpowered to the max.

Richter looked at the silvery undersides of the thousands of leaves above, held on branches of the same color. All connected to the large octuple helix of the trunk. If the entire tree were made of truesilver, then it had an amazingly strong natural defense against malevolent creatures. It also made it even more important to keep the Quickening hidden and protected. Richter had been told that his Core buildings were enough to go to war over but it

had always seemed a bit of an over-exaggeration to him. A living factory of truesilver and fruit that improved both primary and secondary attributes though... He had to keep it secret.

He put the precious rind into his Bag of Holding. Krom would wet himself when he saw it. Elora flew up to him. She held both hands out and closed her eyes for a moment before smiling.

“I can feel the celestial spark within you, my lord. It may take years, but I believe that if you continue to consume the fruit of the Quickening, you may one day become a celestial.”

“That’d be nice,” Richter said with a chuckle, “but I can’t complain about what I’ve already gained just from eating the First Fruit. What matters now is that you and your children partake of the fruit as well.”

Her mouth dropped open, “You would share the fruit with my people?”

“It is your bonded tree,” he reminded her.

“But it is your land! And you are my lord! Even my bonded tree that has made me and my children celestials came from you, Lord Richter!”

Elora’s face was so earnest, that mixed with her small size and youthful face, it was all he could do not to die from the adorableness of it all. It was like puppy-sliding-on-kitchen-floor cute! He knew that would hurt the

diminutive queen's feelings though, so he just said, "I am blessed to have the service of such a wonderful people as the celestial pixies. Even more so, I am blessed to have you as a Companion, Elora." Her face lit up and she gazed at him with just a touch of adoration. He continually had to remind himself that inside that small but womanly body there was still a child who had barely lived any life at all. She was someone who needed guidance in many ways.

Even in this sweet moment he couldn't pass up an opportunity to fuck with someone though. "If you feel like your people shouldn't have access to the fruits, I'll just give them to-"

"No, no, my lord," she interjected quickly, just a thread of panic in her voice. "I would be honored to accept."

"You're sure?" he asked with mock seriousness. "Because I could easily give them to someone else."

She started to look genuinely distressed, "My lord, you were so generous to offer and I do not want to ruin this for my people. Please forgive my rash words!"

Richter winked deliberately at her, "Then I need you to say that you want them. Say 'I want the fruit!'"

She looked at him in surprise, then smiled a bit bashfully. She rose to

the challenge though. After straightening her small back, her four multicolored wings vibrated faster than his eyes could follow. Formally she stated, “Lord Richter, as your vassal and caretaker of the Quickening, I ask that you allow myself and my children to partake of the fruit of this celestial tree.”

Richter cocked his head as if he was considering the manner with full gravity, but he ruined it by chuckling. Elora lasted another full second, before covering her mouth coquettishly, and laughing. Then she blurted, “I want the fruit!”

The chaos seed bowed grandly, “Then you shall have it, my lady. How many do you need?”

“My children can make do with less than you require due to their *diminutive* size. One fruit should be enough for four of them. I am considered *tiny* so I will need half of a fruit, if that is acceptable, my lord.”

Richter looked at his familiar flying with the still singing pixie children and thought he knew just the *tiny* creature that could use the other half. “Of course it is, my Companion. Let’s gather the fruits and see how many there are.”

“Oh, I know that. The Quickening is level two so it produced two hundred fruit.”

“You’re sure?”

Elora gave a small laugh, “Of course. The Quickening is my bonded. There are few things about it that I do not know.”

Richter just nodded. With the sprites helping, he collected all of the fruit in short order. Elora had been exactly correct. One hundred and ninety-nine silver fruit rested in a loose pyramid at his feet. Including the First Fruit, that made two hundred. Twenty-four were allocated for Elora and her brood. He opened each fruit in turn, handing over the glowing inner flesh and pocketing the truesilver rinds. Except for the fact that the First Fruit had been a bit bigger, each other silver sphere looked exactly the same.

As the pixies ate, the colors of their wings deepened. He didn’t need to split each fruit into sections. Four pixies just latched onto one of the glowing spheres, like the four points of a compass. They greedily drank in the celestial energy. Once each quartet finished, they shot into the air laughing. Elora went last, and shared the fruit with Alma. As the dragonling ate, prompts sprung up in Richter’s vision.

*You have elected to feed your familiar fruit from a **Quickening**. As a creature, she lacks skill affinities. In exchange, consuming the celestial power increases all her base Primary Attributes by +5%. In addition, each level she gains provides 1.05 Ability Points applied retroactively.*

Before his very eyes, Richter saw Alma change. Her body became sleeker and her wings lengthened a bit. Her fangs grew sharper as did her claws. The sooty color of her scales that made it so efficient hiding at night grew to a richer black.

More notifications filled Richter's view.

Alma's Total Adjusted Ability Points: 4.85

Finally, consuming the fruit has instilled a celestial spark inside of the psi dragonling. The effects of this can be far reaching, but the immediate consequences are:

- 1) +1% Attack and Defense vs Evil, Abyssal, Hellish and Demonic creatures, magics and effects*
- 2) +1% bonus to personal healing*

The +5% increase to all of her stats was awesome! Because of her size, it didn't make much of a difference in regards to Strength, but it made a big difference to Intelligence and Wisdom. Her mana pool had increased from eight hundred twenty to eight hundred and sixty-one in the space of a minute. As great as that was though, Richter was honestly more excited about the boost to her ability points.

Now that she was level thirty-eight, gaining additional points was proving to be especially difficult. She only got one per level. Eating the fruit

had just given her a free point, and once she reached level forty-one, she'd get another! He had a strong feeling that getting her to level seven in Psi Bond was something that needed to happen sooner rather than later. Richter had no idea about what a "celestial spark" really was, but anything that protected his girl was something he could get behind. He summoned her status page and this time changed the interface to see her attribute distribution. The chaos seed liked how his little killer was progressing.

Name: Alma	Level: 38, 71%	Race: Psi Dragonling
STATS		
Health: 130	Mana: 861 <i>Regen/min: 51.84</i>	Stamina: 180 <i>Regen/min: 10.8</i>
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 5	Agility: 34	Dexterity: 35
Constitution: 13	Endurance: 18	Intelligence: 86
Wisdom: 86	Charisma: 18	Luck: 18
SPELL POWER BONUSES		
Air 50%	Life 50%	
RESISTANCES		
Air 50%	Mental 100%	Life 50%
ABILITIES (Unused Points:4.85)		
Psi Bond – Lvl 6, points to next level: 5 Psi Blast – Lvl 3, points to next level: 3 Brain Drain – Lvl 7, points to next level: 7 Psi Channeling – Lvl 2, points to next level: 2		

Richter closed Alma's window and opened Elora's instead. His Companion's stats had improved just like his own, though he didn't know what secondary attribute she had increased. It was clear that she was becoming a force to be reckoned with. Her Dexterity was insane! The three points that were auto-allocated into the stat every level, coupled with the modifier from her being a *tiny* creature, had almost put her over a hundred points.

Name: Elora	Race: Royal Celestial Pixie	Disposition: Ally
Profession: Herbalist	Level: 22, 34%	Liege Lord: Richter
Alignment: Lawful Good (3)		
STATS		
Health: 140	Mana: 410	Stamina: 200
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 5	Agility: 40	Dexterity: 95
Constitution: 14	Endurance: 20	Intelligence: 41
Wisdom: 22	Charisma: 16	Luck: 17
SKILLS		
Air Magic: 5	Herb Lore: 61	Life Magic: 9
Dark Magic: 3	Water Magic: 7	
RESISTANCES		
Air Magic: 22%	Water Magic: 22%	Dark Magic: 22%
	Life Magic: 22%	
ABILITIES		

Celestial Pixie Song – Evoke strong emotions, summon images and grant status changes. Stronger songs will be triggered by specific events

Tree Communion – Female pixies can bond to a specific tree and bear young. Being separated from her bonded tree will weaken a pixie over time.

Fate's Companion – Form a meidon with their destined sprite

Force Blast – Focus mana into a concentrated magical beam

DESCRIPTION

Celestial Pixies receive two points to distribute per level, and each level gives +3 to Dexterity, +1 to Agility and +1 to Intelligence. Celestial Pixies receive a racial boost to movement speed.

The benefits from sharing the Quickening fruit weren't limited to just stat boosts. Richter enjoyed a relationship boost with every pixie that consumed the fruit. He also collected every rind. As the pixies had been feeding, even more people had come under the canopy. Richter picked up three of the silver fruits and took them to Hisako, Yoshi and Sion. Even the sword adept was moved, as evidenced by a relationship boost prompt. They consumed the fruits, and Richter moved on.

Terrod and Caulder both received one, as did Tabia. Richter was concerned that Randolphus might be offended at being excluded, but the Spy had apparently already guessed that celestial fruit might not coincide with his nature. He just thanked Richter for the consideration and continued marking on his clipboard, recording each person that was given a silver fruit. Krom received one of course, as did Beyan. The Smith was blown away by the

wonderful gift, but it was hard to say if he was more moved by the fruit or by the fact that he would get to work with truesilver.

Twenty-seven people had been taken by Nexus for their Trials, including Krom. Richter set aside another twenty-six for them. He also gave one to each of the new corporals, Ox and Schroeder, as well as Sion's new second, Kentyiro. Five of the precious fruits were allocated to Tabia for potion experimentation. He was hoping that the Professed Alchemist might be able to make something worthwhile from the celestial spheres. He emphasized that he was to get the metal rinds back as soon as possible, something to which she readily agreed.

Ultimately, even including the fruit he set aside, there were still more than a hundred silver orbs left over from this first crop. Richter realized he would have to think hard about the best people to gift the fruit to. It could definitely be a strong motivator. He had already decided that no Quickening fruit would be sold outside the village. Both the secret of the Quickening and the tree itself had to be protected.

Hisako stated that she intended to do some Dungeon diving and requested that he give permission to another ten of her warriors. He acceded with a smile. Richter gave Krom all the rinds and put the extra fruit into his bag. A quick run over to the treasury would let him try out his new skill.

“I’ll be back in the Forge in a bit,” Richter called out. Then he took off at a run. After he built up some speed, he triggered his new skill. It was amazing. Each step let him coast over the grass like he was ice skating. There was no loss of momentum and the lack of friction let him move even faster than if he was sprinting. The downside was the stamina burn. He realized that his stamina was falling faster than it would have just from running. It wasn’t that much worse, but it was still a consideration. After he’d run a bit, Richter decided to try his increased jump as well.

Finishing a glide step with both feet on the ground, he bent his knees and launched himself upward. He got some air! No more bitch Double Dribble *clang* for him! He was definitely in *BOOM SHAKA LAKA* territory now! The 20% bonus to his jump was immediately apparent. His stamina dropped by twenty-four points, but he easily cleared six feet. At the apex, he thought about gliding and he kept sliding smoothly forward. Staying at the same elevation made him feel a strain in his calves, but descending at a thirty-degree angle took almost no effort at all.

Richter felt his weight reassert itself the moment his two point five seconds of glide time was lost. He thought he’d feel wobbly or off-balance at first, but either because of the skill itself or his high Agility, he felt like he was in complete control. As he started to fall, Richter thought about jumping again and his descent arrested sharply. He continued to drift down like a

marble through honey, but he was able to jump upward again.

Now he was ten feet above the ground and Alma flew around him, peppering him with questions.

How are you doing that? Have you always been able to? Why aren't you answering, master? Master!

Richter just chuckled and skidded in mid-air, thinking about jumping again. This time, he leapt to the side and his trajectory changed. His stamina dropped precipitously and it was harder to jump, but he still managed it. He lunged right at his dragonling who squawked and corkscrewed away. Richter jumped in mid-air again and shot after her. He was having the time of his life!

You can't escape your master, Alma! I'm-

That, unfortunately, was when two things happened. One, his glide time from the latest jump expired. And two, his stamina dropped below what he needed for another midair jump. He dropped like a stone. He landed hard, one arm barely keeping him from doing a full faceplant.

With a groan, he finished, "A leaf on the wind."

CHAPTER 56 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



The sound of a smug dragoness laughing inside of your head is not what you want out of life. The effect was not greatly improved by her audibly trumpeting her superiority. Definitely didn't help that Sion was laughing and loudly shouting, "Did you see that? He went down so hard!"

Picking up both himself and the few shreds of dignity he had left, Richter dusted himself off and kept jogging towards the hill leading to the village proper. He definitely shot a glare at a guard when the man asked if he was okay. The other guard was smart enough to just keep staring straight ahead. After he was past, Richter allowed himself a small chuckle at his own stupidity and just kept going.

The first order of the day was to start enchanting again. There was always more work to be done. Hisako's sprites hunting the lands around the village had brought in an influx of soul stones for him to use. There were more than enough to power his own enchantments now. The sprites' high

skill levels in Archery even let them retrieve and reuse the *Soul Trap* arrows a good bit of the time. Krom was already back in the forge, yelling at people to stoke the fires higher. He was cradling the truesilver rinds like precious children. Richter walked up and discussed an idea he'd been considering for several days. The dwarf stroked his beard with his free hand and offered a suggestion, but agreed that it was a good thought.

Before he started working, Richter made some Core building purchases. Now that Krom was back and more of the villagers were starting to learn Smithing, they needed more work spaces. Richter placed his hand on the central anvil and accessed the Forge of Heaven's interface. He scanned through the structures he could add to the building and made his choices.

*Greetings, Master of the **Forge of Heavens**. You have chosen to add another Master Anvil (50 points), three secondary anvils (21 points) and another hearth (15 points) to the structure of the Forge. This will cost 86 Alteration Points in total. Currently, there are 100/100 Alteration Points available in your Core building at level one. Do you wish to expend them? Yes or No?*

Richter chose "Yes" then just stood back to enjoy the show.

Core buildings were powerful for many reasons, but one of the features that truly distinguished them from traditional buildings was their ability to grow. In a Magic Forge, the smiths might one day find that there

was another weapon rack in response to them making a great number of swords. It could anticipate the needs of those that used it. That growth could also be directed by using the building's Alteration Points. Those points only regenerated at a rate of one per day so he'd basically just used three months' worth, but he had also just greatly improved the possible productivity of the entire mystic smithy.

The locations of the other anvils, tools and hearths shifted to accommodate the new structures. An oversized anvil started growing from the floor. As the elementum flowed upward, the original anvil was moved towards the center of the forge. At the same time, three smaller anvils began to rise from the ground. The other anvils slid across the floor as well.

The new formation had the two large central anvils in the center of the building, directly across from one another like the dashes of an equal sign. The smaller anvils ringed them like a dashed circle. The two hearths stood opposite to each other on the outside of the circle. The columns that ringed the Forge of Heavens moved outward as more flooring was created to accommodate the additions.

Some of the smiths exclaimed in dismay when the changes started. This, of course, was exactly what Richter's mischievous heart desired. It only took a shout from Krom calling them all "Namby pamby ninny finnies," to get them over their shock and back to work. The entire process only took a

few minutes, and soon the ringing of hammers could be heard again.

Richter started enchanting blades and armor as quickly as they were completed. After only his first hour, he was rewarded for his efforts by finishing not one, but two quests. He also earned the next quests in each chain.

Congratulations! You have finished the Quest: **The Power of Two I**

You have proven that you are an Enchanter of note. You have successively completed 10 dual enchantments!

Reward: 5 Talent Points. Total Talent Points: 22

Reward: 188 (base 300 x 1.25 x 0.5) experience points.

XP deficit remaining: -98,595

You have unlocked a Profession Quest: **The Power of Two II**

You have progressed along the path of the Enchanter. Make a total of 100 dual enchantments to complete this quest.

Reward: 10 Talent Points

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Congratulations! You have finished the Quest: **Practice Makes Perfect III**

You have been true to your Profession and have enchanted 500 items!

Reward: 20 Talent Points. Total Talent Points: 42

Reward: 313 (base 500 x 1.25 x 0.5) experience points

XP deficit remaining: -98,282

You have unlocked a Profession Quest: **Practice Makes Perfect III**

Dedicate yourself to your new Profession. Honor who you are. Will you enchant 2500 items?

Reward: 30 Talent Points

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Richter gratefully accepted both new quests. The boosts to his experience were small, but the real point of Profession quests was, of course, the Talent Points. Once again, being the head of a village of several hundred people had its perks. Having to pay to have time in someone else's forge, to find or buy his own soul stones, and to mind-numbingly repeat the same enchantment that couldn't even rank up due to a lack of a Core building...

Richter wasn't sure he'd have the patience for it. No, that wasn't right. He definitely wouldn't have the patience for it.

The influx of Talent Points opened up new options for him. Namely, Richter had found that he liked having a wide variety of enchantments. So much so that he had already picked out his next spells to unlock. He could only choose from Earth or Life magic, unless he wanted to pay another ten Talent Points to unlock a new Basic Element spell school, but that still left plenty of options. Within those two branches there was a veritable treasure trove of level one spells that only cost one Talent Point each.

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Grease**. This enchantment can be applied to two mediums: **Armor** and **Items**. You must choose which medium you wish to unlock. Unlocking further mediums will require purchase with Talent Points.*

Richter chose "Armor."

You have now unlocked the (Armor) enchantment: **Slick**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Earth

You are currently at 0/1,200 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

*You have: **41 Talent Points** remaining.*

And on it went.

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Summon Insects**. ...*

You have now unlocked the (Item) enchantment: **Summon Insects**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Earth

You are currently at 0/2000 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Weak Thorns Underfoot**. ...*

You have now unlocked the (Item) enchantment: **Briar**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Earth

You are currently at 0/4,080 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Weak Charm.** ...*

You have now unlocked the (Weapon) enchantment: **Charm Humanoid**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/4,800 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Weak Life Aura (Item)** ...*

You have now unlocked the (Item) enchantment: **Life's Radiance**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/4000 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Weak Life Beacon.** ...*

You have now unlocked the (Item) enchantment: **Call for Aid**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/3,040 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Weak Slow Heal.** ...*

You have now unlocked the (Item) enchantment: **Heal**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/1,600 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

He chose to double up on the healing enchantments, purchasing both the armor and item enchantments for *Weak Slow Heal*.

*You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: **Weak Slow Heal.** ...*

You have now unlocked the (Armor) enchantment: **Heal**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/1,600 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

Finally, he bought:

You have chosen to unlock the enchantment for: Virol's Blessing. ...

You have now unlocked the (Item) enchantment: **Plant Growth**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/6,720 of the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

*You have: **31 Talent Points** remaining.*

There were a few other level-one spells, *Weak Cure Poison*, *Weak Cure Disease*, *Weak Call Small Creature* as well as other mediums that he hadn't unlocked for the enchantments he already had, but he needed the Talent Points for something else he had in mind. Zooming back out on the Talent tree, he made another purchase.

*You have advanced the Talent: **Increase Soul Stone Yield** to Rank II for 20*

Talent Points. Soul Stone Yield now increased by 50%. Progressing to Rank III will cost 40 Talent Points.

*You have: **11 Talent Points** remaining.*

Richter rerouted his auto-allocation of mana from going to level two of *Life Aura* and started unlocking *Charm*. Six hundred MP went into the cost immediately from his mana pool. Losing so much at once caused a tightening at his temples, but he had more than a hundred left. Richter pushed the pain aside. With his mana regeneration rate of 32.4 MP/min, he needed roughly two hours to learn the new enchantment.

The chaos seed put his head down and kept working. Exactly one hundred twenty-nine minutes and thirty-six seconds later, a prompt appeared. It would have come faster if Alma had been close enough to channel some of her mana to him, but she was out hunting as usual. He certainly wasn't going to complain about the experience she brought in. She had already made a kill that morning, netting him several hundred XP. Besides, he'd still learned a new and powerful enchantment!

You have learned the (Weapon) enchantment: **Charm Humanoid, Level I**

Enchantment Size: 6

Enchantment School: Life

Effect 1: *Charm* – Each rank:

- 1) Increases the chance to charm a humanoid
- 2) Allows you to *Charm* a humanoid up to level (rank*5)
- 3) Increase length of maximum *Charm* effect by 5 minutes

You now have unlocked the (Weapon) enchantment: **Charm Humanoid, Level II**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Life

You are currently at 0/480,000 for the mana cost to learn this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

The enchantment cost on *Charm* was crazy high, but then, making the enemy fight on your behalf was a force multiplier. Apparently, the enchantment would only work on weaklings, level five and below, until he ranked it up. Once he got to the sixth rank though, any archer armed with these arrows would be able to get enemies up to level thirty to fight for their side for half an hour. The only problem was that the sixth rank of an enchantment with a base cost of six was ninety-six gods-damned Enchantment Points! That would make it just about the most expensive

enchantment he'd ever created. It would require three high level souls. When you factored in that enchanted arrows could rarely be retrieved with the magic intact, the cost was staggering.

That was why Richter was so happy that he got another expected prompt.

Congratulations! You have completed the Specialist Quest: **The Essence of Knowledge I**

You have converted five of your known spells into enchantments. Truly, the path of an Essence Enchanter is your true calling.

Reward: 5 Talent Points. Total Talent Points: 16

Reward: 156 (base 250 x 1.25 x 0.5) Experience Points

XP deficit remaining: -98,126

You have unlocked the Specialist Quest: **The Essence of Knowledge II**

Continue to expand your knowledge of enchantments, O mighty Essence Enchanter. No foe will be able to stand against your enchantments as you ensorcel blades to specifically spell their death.

Success Conditions: Unlock and learn 25 known spells as enchantments.

Reward: 10 Talent Points.

Penalty for failure or refusal of Quest: None

Do you accept? Yes or No?

That was another reason he had unlocked so many level one spells. He hadn't known for sure, but he was pretty sure the next link in the quest chain would require him to learn more enchantments. The fact that he needed to convert twenty more was a slight nipple twist, but that could be fun too. Richter planned to start practicing his new *Charm* enchantment ASAP, but in the meantime, he began to funnel his mana regen into unlocking the item enchantment for *Heal*. He needed to unlock the item enchantments as quickly as possible if he was going to utilize his new crafting skills.

Now that he had cleared up his Profession and Specialist quests, at least the ones he could finish quickly, he looked at his overall Talent tree again. There was one more Talent he'd been eyeballing and now he had just enough TPs to buy it.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Decrease Required Enchantment Slots** for 10 Talent Points. Each rank of an enchantment takes up a specific amount of enchantment slots. Each rank now requires 10% less Enchantment Points. You currently have Rank I in Decrease Required Enchantment Slots. Progressing to Rank II will cost 20 Talent Points.*

You have: 6 Talent Points remaining.

With a smile on his face, Richter got back to work.

The chaos seed worked tirelessly until lunch, which was when Randolphus showed up. The chamberlain reminded him that “wooing” the freed prisoners to stay in the village was a priority, which meant getting facetime with them was also a priority. Increasing the population of the Mist Village by several hundred would greatly improve his settlement’s production capacity. It would also put him over the minimum required number of people needed to advance his village to level two. That was one of the first quests Richter had been given, but it also remained one of the most elusive. Despite the difficulty, it was never far from his mind.

Richter took his shirt off and dunked his head in a nearby bucket of water. Taking a quick bath, he rinsed the worst of the grime and soot from his body. After so many days spent enchanting, he barely noticed the heat and mess of the forge anymore. Others did though. Deera had made more than one comment that though *she* liked filthy men, perhaps he could take more care in regards to his appearance and smell when around others.

He pulled a clean shirt out of his bag and slipped it over his head. The dirty one went to a village child along with a copper that the girl plucked easily out of the air. She laughed and thanked him before running down

towards where the wash was done. Richter smiled after her. Spoiling kids was a joy that remained the same in any world.

Now more presentable, Richter and his Companion started walking towards the area set aside for the prisoners.

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Randolphus was right. Winning the hearts of the freed prisoners was in the best interest of the village. The real reason that Richter was excited though was that it was a chance to speak with Heman again. The fact that there was another chaos seed in the village was still hard for him to believe. As was the fact that the man had been drawn into The Land years after Richter had been. Clearly his disappearance hadn't caused too great of a stir if the MMORPG had continued to run.

The two men walked over to the tables set up for the refugees' lunch. Richter started feeling that same sensation as before, one that he now knew meant he was approaching a source of chaos, but didn't see Heman yet. He reasoned the man must still be in one of the tents. Many of the freed slaves bowed their head in deference when they saw him. Richter just smiled easily in response and took a place at the end of the line waiting for food. He began to spark up conversation with whomever was around. Soon, the mood eased

and the men and women he had freed were even joking lightly. It was a good sign as far as Richter was concerned.

He made time to move around to various tables, conversing and reassuring the freed slaves one group at a time. He never pushed or cajoled, but he made it clear that they were welcome to his hospitality. A few asked if they would be able to go back to their homes. Richter was quick to assure them that once they were cleared by Sumiko, he would do his best to get them wherever they needed to go.

The chaos seed also made it clear, however, that his village would welcome good men and women. He told them he would pay a strong wage and that food and shelter would be included for the next several months at least. That last bit earned him many thoughtful glances. They were already eating and were better cared for than what some of them had experienced for years, even before they were taken captive. Randolphus was always in the background, making small notes of anything and everything.

It wasn't overly long before the sensation of chaos strengthened and Richter saw Heman approaching. In great spirits, Richter stood up on the bench he'd been sitting on. He drew the short sword from his back and held it straight up into the air before shouting, "I have the POWER!"

Some of the people around him got a bit scared, but relaxed when he

started laughing. Richter didn't notice because his eyes were fixated on Heman. The man's face was set in an expression that Richter didn't recognize except that somehow it looked hungry. Not the hunger of a man ready for lunch, but that of an animal staring at smaller prey. Richter started to frown, but the expression vanished from Heman's face like the shadow of a cloud. All that was left was the newly freed chaos seed's easy smile.

"It is good to see you, my lord," the man said extending an arm.

Richter extended his own, still a bit bothered. It was also strange just shaking hands after so many months. It was the custom in The Land to clasp wrists. Terrod had explained that as a way to ensure there wasn't a blade up the other man's sleeve. Richter found it somewhat reassuring to have a little nuance of his old life return, and as soon as they shook hands, the flash of worry he'd felt about Heman faded away.

"Just call me Richter," he responded with a smile. "How is everything?"

"I can't thank you enough for everything you've given me, man," Heman said with a grin of his own. "And sorry if I sounded weird with the 'Lord Richter' thing. I learned very fast that there are consequences in The Land if you don't show respect to whoever is in charge."

"I'm just happy to finally have someone from back home to talk to,"

Richter told him earnestly.

Heman nodded, "What you've built here is amazing. It is such a relief to just be able to sleep without having to watch your back every moment. And being above ground..." the man looked around in admiration, "You truly do have a slice of heaven here."

"I'm glad you can appreciate it, man," Richter replied happily. It felt good to have his efforts be appreciated, "We may be out in the sticks, but I think we're making something really special here."

"I would love to see more of the village sometime," Heman told him with a smile. "Maybe even the forest outside of the walls. I know you're busy, but if you ever need a break, just let me know."

Richter's guard immediately went up, though he recriminated himself for being so distrusting. Heman had been nothing but cool, and he had given that wand over without asking for anything in return. The other chaos seed must have read his face because he quickly added, "I'm sorry. You made it clear that you would like all of us to be tested by your truthsayer before you give any of us access to the village. If I had something so wonderful I would feel completely the same."

"Yeah, man," Richter began, feeling bad. "I'm sorry that I have to take such a hard line, but-"

Heman held up a hand with an easy smile, “Don’t say another word. I’m just so grateful not to be a prisoner anymore. You have been so good to me and all these people. You didn’t have to help us, but you did. Thank you!”

Richter smiled back, happy that the man was taking it so well. He really wanted to make a good impression on Heman. “I really appreciate your understanding.”

The man nodded, and then asked another question, “You know, I shouldn’t have been asking for favors. I should have been offering to help out! Is there anything you would like me to do? I’ve gathered that your village is preparing for something big.”

A frown started to form on Richter’s face again, but Heman just laughed to assuage his fears. Putting a conspiratorial hand on his shoulder, the other chaos seed whispered loudly, “I’ve found guards like to gossip no matter if they’re goblins, humans or elves. I promise no one has said anything specific, but it’s easy to see that there is a sense of urgency around here.”

Richter nodded. He didn’t like the idea that his people might have loose lips, but he couldn’t fault Heman for being observant. The man was obviously intelligent and had just made a logical conclusion. “We are

preparing for a battle,” he admitted, “but you don’t need to worry about it, man. You’ve been through enough. Just relax.”

“Honestly, Lord Richter,” the Enchanter fixed him with a slight glare and Heman raised his arms in mock surrender, “- okay, okay, Richter. Honestly, I find relaxation to be a bit stressful. I’m better when I have something to do. As wondrous as The Land can be, they haven’t invented adderall as far as I know.” Heman laughed aloud and Richter laughed with him. “I wish when I was given this body, my ADD would have been cured, but it wasn’t. I would appreciate being given something to do. Even if its mining, I’d be happy to help.”

“You would go back into a mine?” Richter asked in disbelief.

“It was the assholes I was working for that I hated, not the act itself. My Mining affinity is high and it’s my highest-level skill. I’m good at it and I usually enjoy doing things that I’m good at. If it would help, then I’d be happy to swing a pick. I can show these guys how we do it back on Earth. Cajun style!”

Richter just couldn’t get over how great and upbeat the guy was. His old concerns about needing to trap the souls of potential chaos seed enemies now seemed overly dark and ridiculous. Maybe it said more about his own state of mind. He didn’t know if he’d be able to have such a positive outlook

if he'd been imprisoned for months. With an appreciative smile, he waved a guard over.

“Heman here has my permission to help out in the iron mine. See that he gets the tools he needs and that he makes it back here safely at the end of his shift.”

“It will be as you command, Lord Richter,” the guard responded promptly, clapping a fist over his heart.

“I still won't be able to give you immunity to the mists,” Richter cautioned, “but they don't penetrate underground, so when you make it into the mine you'll be able to see fine.”

“Completely understand,” Heman said with a smile. “Thank you.”

The two men talked a while longer, until a guard ran up and whispered something to Randolphus. The chamberlain thanked the man then looked at Richter and cocked his head. It was clear the man wanted to speak in private.

Without needing to be asked, Heman stood up, “Thanks for taking the time to chat, Richter. I know you're busy so I'll get out of your hair. If you have anytime tomorrow, I'd appreciate being able to catch up some more.”

“Definitely,” Richter told him, standing and shaking Heman's hand in farewell.

“In fact,” Heman added, “if you wanted to show me some of the forest around the village, I do miss the woods. I know you don’t want to show off your village yet, but I’d love to do some hunting. If this is going to be home, I’d be eager to do some leveling so that I could be actually useful to my new friend.”

The man was so earnest that Richter was slightly at a loss for words. “I can’t promise that I’ll have time. There is a lot to do, but I’d like that too.”

“Seeing as how what you’re doing is keeping my ass safe and breathing, I won’t be stressing you out over what you need to do,” Heman said with a quick laugh. “Have a great day, *my lord!*” he added with a quick salute. He just laughed at Richter’s answering glare and walked off with the guard, eager to get to the mine.

Before Heman had gone more than a dozen yards, he was already engaging the guard in conversation. Another ten steps after that, and the guard laughed out loud at something the chaos seed had said. Richter’s eyes followed them, thinking again how lucky he was that the first chaos seed he’d met was an awesome guy.

He turned his gaze towards Randolphus, “Okay, so what fresh new hell has shown up at our gates?”

“You are more right than you know, my lord,” the Spy replied

enigmatically. “I think you should see this for yourself.”

Richter followed his chamberlain. Soon it was clear that they were walking towards the main village gate. Soon after that, the reason he had been summoned became abundantly clear.

Caulder had his mace out and was waving it threateningly at a small figure across the drawbridge. “I do not care what you thought was going to happen, you slippery kindir bastard! If you set so much as one foot on this bridge, I will brain you. There is no way your sticky fingers are making their way into this village!”

Shinecatcher was standing on the other side of the trench, staring at the sergeant with a shocked and aggrieved expression. The overall effect was marred by the fact that he was only standing on one foot. The other one was hovering over the wood of the bridge. That boot was slowly lowering while the kindir moved his toes in slow circles. Richter thought that Caulder might be about to unlock a Fire Magic skill, the man’s face was so red.

“So much as one toe,” Caulder repeated with deadly intensity. “I swear to the banished gods, that-” The sergeant paused, “Is that my dagger?”

Shinecatcher pulled the blade from his belt and examined it carefully, before responding with a completely straight face. “What dagger?”

Caulder began to splutter and looked like he was two seconds away

from frothing at the mouth. Yup, Richter thought. Definitely unlocking some serious Fire magic.

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Richter defused the situation by inviting the kindir inside the village walls to eat and drink. Caulder looked at him with a seriously betrayed expression on his face, but it turned out to be a moot point. Surprisingly, Shinecatcher declined the invitation. “I would love to come in and spend more time with your delightful manservant here-”

“I am a sergeant,” Caulder snapped.

Shinecatcher pursed his lips in thought before replying, “I think my uncle had that. I know a cream that should clear it right up.” He turned his attention away from Caulder who now had a vein throbbing in his forehead and continued, “The elders of my village made me promise to find you and return as quickly as possible though.”

“What’s the urgency?” Richter asked.

“Oh,” the kindir responded offhandedly, “I think it is because our settlement was attacked last night. Some of our animals were killed, five of

us were dragged away and about ten more of us were injured.”

Richter just blinked at the daffy man and his laissez-faire tone. “Are you under attack right now?”

Shinecatcher looked around in confusion, “I do not believe so.”

“He means your village, not you, you daft bastard!” Caulder snapped.

“Oh. You really should have specified,” Shinecatcher admonished, “but no. The undead rarely ever attack during the day.”

And now there are undead, Richter thought to himself. The kindir was really burying the lead on this story. Still, making new friends and getting the secret of the kindir’s immunity to the mists was a priority. “Okay then,” the chaos seed said. “Sergeant, assemble a war party. Make sure you include Sion. I want either you or Terrod in the band, but not both. One of you needs to stay here. I want the remaining guards put on high alert, just in case.”

The last statement was said with a quick look at Shinecatcher. The small man seemed innocent enough, but so had the Assassin that had literally cut his nuts off. Richter didn’t plan on trusting anyone if he didn’t have to. “Bring two biomancers to help with any injured that might be at Shinecatcher’s settlement. Kit our group with the best enchanted weapons Krom has to offer, specifically the new ones meant to crush undead.” He

looked up at the sun. It was about an hour after noon.

“We aren’t focusing on speed this time. I want everyone dressed for some serious damage and defense. Get a band of about twenty-five people together. They can all benefit from my Forest Movement bonus. Tell Beyan to come along as well, and make sure he brings his pet. I want everyone ready to go in the next twenty minutes.” If Shinecatcher was right about the sun, they had more than enough time to make it to his settlement before another attack happened. The choice of heavy armor would slow them down, but it also meant they’d be in a better combat position when they got to the kindir’s home. Once they arrived, Richter wanted to be prepared for anything.

Caulder snapped his hand to his chest and started giving orders to his subordinates. Richter looked at his chamberlain, “Want to come?”

“I have work to do here, my lord. Unless you need me?”

“No,” Richter said shaking his head. “We haven’t come up against anything in our lands yet that a full warband shouldn’t be able to handle. If we do, then we simply won’t engage. In that eventuality, I’ll send Alma back with a message for you to prepare a larger host. If you could get some of the salted meat from the rock giant together though, that would be appreciated.”

“As you command, though we are running low after the raid on the

goblins,” Randolphus agreed, bowing. “I will see to it.”

Richter nodded after him and jogged off to handle his own preparations. The last sight he had of the kindir was Caulder positioning three guards on the bridge, physically making it impossible for Shinecatcher to cross into the village.

The chaos seed sent out a mental call to his familiar who responded that she was on her way back. She’d managed two more kills that morning and his experience deficit had dropped another two thousand points. Richter poured on a little more speed, eager to be underway. If they were going to fight a nest of undead, he wanted to do it while the sun was still high in the sky.

The first stop was the Forge of Heavens. He let Krom in on what was happening. The dwarf looked extremely regretful that he couldn’t join the hunt, but the Smith knew he was needed in the smithy. After a few barked orders, Richter filled his quiver with various enchanted arrows and grabbed several more bundles for the other archers. He also filled his bag with enchanted high steel crossbow bolts. After a nearly disastrous friendly fire incident on a previous expedition, Terrod had demanded that the village casters have at least a modicum of training in the ranged weapons. Crossbows had now become the weapon of choice for casters in the village.

The dwarves also quickly and efficiently helped him into his Enhanced Sprite Armor. The chaos seed flexed after donning it, always enjoying the boost to his attributes that came from the enchanted raiment.

After that, he ran up the hill to the northern meadow. Waving to the gardeners, he stepped into the Dragon's Cauldron. Luckily, Tabia was not in the middle of an experiment, but instead was just supervising the less skilled village alchemists as they practiced their craft.

“Greetings, my lord. You seem to be in a rush.”

“I am. I’m taking a warband out to deal with a nest of undead. I don’t know how severe the infestation is or exactly what we’re going to find, so I need anything that might be helpful.”

The brown-skinned elf might occasionally yell at her underlings, but she was also a seasoned mercenary. After hearing what was happening, she just nodded and started opening cabinets. She withdrew several sets of red, blue and green potions, for restoring health, mana and stamina respectively. There were a large number that restored about two hundred points each and a smaller number that restored almost four hundred. Then she handed over two more large trays filled with potions. One was filled with a murky dark-grey gas. A small amount of thick fluid had precipitated on the bottom. The other contained a semi-clear golden fluid that spun slowly in the vials even when it

wasn't being touched.

<p>You have found:</p> <p>Allure Potion of the Crypt Mistress x 50</p>	<p>Alchemy Class: Unusual</p> <p>Alchemy Level: Suspension</p> <p>Alchemy Strength: Enhanced</p> <p>Durability: 7/7</p> <p>Weight: 0.1 kg</p> <p>Traits: This potion, once released, creates a gaseous cloud that will attract Death creatures up to level 21. The base radius of this cloud is 100 yards. Be warned. The creatures attracted may fall into a rage upon finding there is no recipient for their passions.</p>
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<p>You have found:</p> <p>Sun Lotus Poison x 50</p>	<p>Alchemy Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Alchemy Level: Infusion</p> <p>Alchemy Strength: Fortified</p> <p>Durability: 7/7</p> <p>Weight: 0.1 kg</p> <p>Traits: This poison has no effect on living creatures, but can be devastating to Death creatures. Causes 48-69</p>
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damage/second of Life damage for 16 seconds

“Nice,” Richter complimented her with a smile.

“I hope they work well,” Tabia responded.

Richter’s smile slipped, “They might not work?”

“Oh, they will work, by which I mean they will have an effect,” Tabia responded, shrugging slightly. “The prompts, however, are always... *ideal* representations of the way a potion should perform. With the health, stamina and mana potions, I know the Recipe and so we can be almost certain the description will be correct, within a reasonable margin of error.” Richter frowned at that, but she ignored him. “These two, however,” she said gesturing to the Sun Lotus and Crypt Mistress potions, “are new formulas.” Her voice trailed off.

“Sooo?” Richter asked after a few moments of silence.

“So good luck,” she responded abruptly with a smile. Then she went back to supervising the other alchemists, clearly feeling the conversation was over. Richter supposed it was. If he wanted her to experiment and try new things, then he’d have to be okay with the results not always being perfect.

Richter put all the potions into his bag and started jogging back

towards the gate. Everyone was waiting. He had expected nothing less. These were his people, his Companions, and his friends. Sion nodded at him with an easy smile. The sprite was always up for a good fight. Kentyiro was there as well, along with four other meidon sprites. Caulder had apparently decided to come along, and he had eight other guardsmen with him, including Sedrin. The nine-fingered man nodded at Richter in respect and the chaos seed nodded back. The two of them were bound forever in remembrance of a small girl named Petal.

The guards were all armed with heavy spears or maces and wore enchanted chainmail. There were four Life magi as well, there to support his group but also to offer aid to the wounded kindir. All of them were carrying crossbows. Two aeromancers and two Dark casters rounded out the party.

The max number of people Richter could include in a war party was eleven, but any neutral or ally inside of his War Leader Sphere of Influence could benefit from his *open* war badges. Thankfully, that included *Movement Speed III*, which would increase their travel through the forest by 30%. Hopefully it would offset the movement penalties from his men wearing medium armor. The chaos seed planned on only taking eleven people with him into the actual lair, but traveling through the forest in numbers was definitely advisable.

Richter handed out health potions to everyone. The fighters and

archers got stamina potions. He handed out mana potions to the casters and meidon sprites. Richter also gave Beyan some of the stronger mana potions as the man was the most advanced caster in the group except for the war leader himself. Randolphus handed out the jerky made from the flesh of his old nemesis, the rock giant. The powerful meat increased Strength by three points and Constitution by two points for almost an hour. Sometimes Richter still reflected on the moral implications of having carved up the body of a sapient being and feeding it to his people. Then he would remember how much he'd hated that craggy-skinned asshole and just said 'Fuck it.'

Preparations complete, they moved out. Shinecatcher took the lead. After enduring a few minutes of bickering, Richter decided to make Caulder pull up the rear. That meant Richter had to endure the kindir's incessant babble, but still, it seemed preferable.

After the first mile, Alma caught up with them. She landed on Richter's shoulder, nuzzling his cheek for a moment. Then she took off again, flying overwatch. The chaos seed felt much better with his dragonling feeding him information from above. They had been relatively safe even before his familiar had arrived though, since as usual the forest predators avoided a party as large as his.

Richter caught sight of the tracks of various monsters and beasts. Wolves, hunting cats, bears and other more exotic prints he couldn't identify,

but none were large enough or threatening enough to warrant diverting from their path. They continued on.

They had traveled about four miles when Alma sent him a message.

I found something. She sent him an image of a large tree. It was about forty feet tall. He didn't recognize the species, but it had vines hanging down from its tallest branches almost to the ground, obscuring the dragonling's view of most of the trunk. It was about two hundred yards east of their current position. Richter didn't really see what had piqued her curiosity until he saw that there were bones scattered around the tree.

He called a halt, then had Caulder, Sion and Beyan come closer. He pulled out his Traveler's Map. With a slight mental flexion, he had the map zoom in on the location of the tree. The magical scroll became a live-view monitor of exactly what Alma was seeing and relaying to her master who, in turn, relayed it to the map.

"Do any of you know what this is?" he asked.

All three of the men shook their heads, but Sion looked hesitant. At Richter's prompting, he shrugged, "I have never seen a tree like this, but it reminds me of stories I heard as a child. Tales that parents tell their children to scare them into being good. 'Eat your food or we will feed you to a boggin. Be nice to your brother or we'll feed you to a gobbler tree.' You

learn that the stories aren't true when you grow up, but as a child, tales that the very trees might kill you... It scared the piss out of me and many other sprite children."

Richter nodded. With the sprites' deep connection to the forest, the idea that a tree might actually mean an enemy would probably be their worst nightmare. "What was in these stories?"

"In the tales I remember, a sprite would be walking along and would suddenly be grabbed. Hundreds of vines would squeeze his arms, legs and neck. My uncle really liked talking about that part." Sion replied with a small shudder.

"It strangles you?" Richter asked. "Then why do they call it a gobbler tree?"

"Only the lucky were killed quickly. They weren't aware of what would happen next. Once a gobbler tree had you, it would drag you towards the trunk. There, it would put you in its mouth. The mouth would close, but it wouldn't chew. Instead, the tree's saliva would just start dissolving you. Ever so slowly."

Sion's voice grew slightly hushed as he mimicked the tone the story had been told in during his childhood. "First your eyes would sting, then your hair would fall out a bit at a time. Your skin would feel like it had been

burned by the summer sun for days. After that, your skin begins to tear and you bleed. You bleed from your top to your bottom and the horrible sap is absorbed into your body. At that point, you start melting from the inside out. The whole time, you screamed, but no one can hear you inside of a gobbler tree. ‘Gobble you, gobble me, gobbled pixie, never free.’” Sion’s last words had been sing-song. He really shuddered this time, before looking at Richter. “My uncle is what you would call a ‘complete asshole’.”

The chaos seed nodded thoughtfully. “I won’t argue that, but he may have just helped save a life.” Sion looked at him quizzically, but Richter just motioned for him to follow.

They all made their way towards the tree. Richter stopped a good fifty yards away. He would have preferred to be even farther, but the forest layout didn’t allow for that. He had Caulder arrange the guards in a shield wall, and had the casters stand behind it. The meidon sprites stood in front along with Richter, arrows nocked. Their pixies flew above them, staring at the strange tree in apprehension. They had all become agitated as they approached, though none of the flying children could say why. Though they didn’t say it, Sion, Caulder, Richter and Beyan all felt the same faint unease as they approached the tree.

The reason why had become obvious to Richter as soon as the tree came into view.

Name: Abyssal Gobrit Tree (Immature)

Disposition: Hateful

Gobrit trees are made from the union of a mature tree and a sakeru pixie. The celestial nature of the pixie which created this monster has allowed an abyssal seed to fester in the heart of the tree. It has not yet grown to full potency, but the pixie's power has already made this tree formidable and dangerous.

*Special Attack: **Tentacle Lash** – The tree can use its long vines autonomously to attack in all directions at once.*

*Special Attack: **Corrupt** – The attacks of this creation are laced with abyssal energy*

*Special Attack: **Spawn** – The gobrit can create a short-lived version of itself to aid in its defense.*

Level: 3

Health: 4,738

Mana: 381 **Stamina:** 9,382

Strength: 38

Agility: 3

Dexterity: 4

Constitution: 100

Endurance: 930

Intelligence: 38

Wisdom: 15

Charisma: 1

Luck: 17

After seeing the monster's status page, a theory occurred to Richter.

How exactly did you know this tree was a problem, my love?

Richter asked. He looked up at his familiar who was perched above him on a nearby branch.

As soon as I saw it, something felt wrong, master. When I got closer and saw the bones, I knew that you would want to know about it.

Richter nodded, expecting that answer. He asked everyone who had eaten the Quickening fruit if they felt something “off” about the vine-covered tree. The answer was “yes” across the board. Those who had not consumed the silver fruit didn’t have any ill feelings towards it.

Sion looked like he was about to burst from lack of information at this point. He and everyone else kept scanning the surrounding woods for attackers, though naturally their gaze was drawn again and again to the tree.

“I’ve got some things to tell all of you,” Richter began, “and you’re not going to like it.”

Sion started swearing less than a minute later.

It was clear they couldn’t just move past the tree. It would be great if they could. It wasn’t like it was about to uproot itself and chase them, after all... at least Richter didn’t think that would happen. The danger the gobrit tree posed was too great to ignore though, and even if it wasn’t a threat they had to save the *sakeru* pixie.

Richter explained that he had suspected the pixie might be there after hearing Sion’s singsong recitation about a gobbled pixie never being free. Obviously, some mention of a similar creature had been preserved in the wood sprites’ oral history. Gobrit had been changed in to “gobbler” throughout the years, but the warning had remained. After learning about

sakeru from Elora, Richter had started considering that there might be a connection.

“You’re obviously right,” Sion told him, “but how the hell did you connect those two dots?” His voice was thick with stress at seeing a childhood nightmare come to life. He barely blinked as he stared at the abyssal tree, not willing to lose sight of it for an instant.

Richter stopped and thought about his friend’s question. He hadn’t really considered questioning his own logic before, but Sion was right. It was a real leap. Was this his increased Creativity or Intuition coming into play? The chaos seed sighed. Like so many questions, there was no way to know for sure. All he could do was focus on the now. And what mattered now was killing this tree and, ideally, recovering Elora’s lost child. He already knew that was a secondary consideration though. He couldn’t allow something abyssal to infest his lands. The fucking tree was only level three and it was already a powerhouse. Richter didn’t want to even think about how strong it could get if it advanced to level ten or twenty or, worse, if that abyssal seed inside of it matured.

“I’m not 100% sure,” Richter told his friend. “That’s not what matters anyway.”

“What does matter, my lord?” Caulder asked.

Richter looked at the sergeant with steel in his eyes, “That we send this demon back to hell.”

CHAPTER 59 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



“What?” Sion cried in disbelief. “There’s a demon too?”

“What?” Richter asked, a bit irritated. The sprite’s question was kind of ruining the badass groove he was going for. “No!” he snapped. “The demon is the tree.”

“You said it’s an abyssal creature, not a demon,” Sion told him with irritation of his own.

“What’s the difference?” Richter asked. The tree still hadn’t moved at all, but it was seriously freaking him out to be having a semantics conversation so close to a monster with a crap-ton of health that had been augmented by a *sakeru* pixie.

“Demons come from demonic realms, not abyssal planes,” Sion told him, not taking his eyes off the tree. “And demons are friggin’ demons! We do *not* want one of those here and you shouldn’t speak it into existence so that one could be here!” The sprite spit to the side, something Richter had

seen his people do to ward off ill intentions.

“Seems like kind of a dumb distinction,” Richter told him. His fear at being near such a large predator, mixed with his irritation, made his tone more than a bit snappy.

“It’s not dumb,” Sion spat back. “You’re dumb. The opposite of a celestial is an abyssal. The opposite of divine is demonic, and since we’re on the subject, the opposite of heavenly is hellish.”

Richter still couldn’t believe they were arguing right before battle, but at this point, his friend was seriously pissing him off, so he couldn’t let it go, “I still don’t get the difference. It’s a fucking monster from a demonesqy kind of realm. Happy now? Good enough?”

“No, I’m not, and no, it’s not,” Sion responded, clipping each word even as he kept his arrow pointed at the tree. “You told me that where you come from people fight over their skin color or political differences or sports teams! *That* is moronic. Creatures coming from different *planes of existence* have actual differences that matter!”

“My lord,” Caulder said, also keeping his eye on the giant killer tree, “Maybe we could discuss this later? Perhaps after we deal with this monster?”

“Fine,” Richter muttered, still irritated with Sion even if the sprite

might be right. He brought up his War Leader screen. Any badges bought would only affect the next war party he formed. That was why Richter hadn't actually chosen the eleven members he would fight with yet. He had also been saving his War Points so that he could buy something really good. That has always been his tactic while gaming. Not nickeling and diming his resources for short-term gains. Richter had always like getting some rare and awesome high-level skill and then using it to crush his enemies in unexpected ways.

Total War Points Remaining: 651.

Badge	Cost	Description (applies to entire party)
Melee Attack I (Closed)	25	+5% to melee attacks
Melee Defense I (Closed)	25	+5% to melee defense
Ranged Attack I (Closed)	25	+5% to ranged attacks
Ranged Defense I (Closed)	25	+5% to ranged defense
Magical Strength	25	+3% to magical strength

I (Closed)		*Must specify spell school upon acquisition. May only choose spell school used during battle leading a War Party.
Magical Strength III (Life) (Closed)	100	+9% to Life magical strength *Must specify spell school upon acquisition. May only choose spell school used during battle leading a War Party.
Magical Defense I (Closed)	25	+2% to magical defense *Must specify spell school upon acquisition. May only choose spell school used during battle leading a War Party.
Skilled Positions (Independent)	400 to unlock each	Available Positions: Tank III: LOCKED Scout III: LOCKED Healer III: LOCKED
Lead by Example II (Personal)	300	LOCKED
Movement Speed I (Open)	100	+10% Movement Speed *Must specify terrain type upon acquisition. May only choose terrain type that the War party has traveled on.
Movement Speed IV (Forest)	700	+40% Movement Speed in Forests

(Open)		
<p>Favored Enemy I</p> <p>(Open)</p>	250	<p>When fighting a favored enemy:</p> <p>+10% Melee and Ranged Attack and Defense</p> <p>+6% Magical Strength (all Basic Elements)</p> <p>+4% Magical Defense (all Basic Elements)</p> <p>*Must specify enemy upon badge acquisition. May only choose enemies which have been fought while leading a War Party. Only one favored enemy per War Party formation.</p>
<p>Favored Enemy II (Goblin)</p> <p>(Open)</p>	500	<p>When fighting goblins:</p> <p>+20% Melee and Ranged Attack and Defense</p> <p>+12% Magical Strength (all Basic Elements)</p> <p>+8% Magical Defense (all Basic Elements)</p> <p>*Only one favored enemy per War Party formation.</p>
<p>Trainer I</p> <p>(Closed)</p>	250	+5% experience earned for War Party members
<p>Power Level II</p> <p>(Closed)</p>	250	20% of the experience earned by the entire war party can be channeled to a specific member. The third rank of this badge

		<p>allows the recipient to be three times beyond the Sphere of Influence and still receive the experience.</p> <p><small>*Experience recipient must be within Sphere of Influence</small></p>
<p>Sphere of Influence II</p> <p>(Personal)</p>	500	<p>Increase range of Sphere of Influence by 200%</p>

There were many options available, but what he needed right at that moment was something that would keep his people alive. That meant staying out of the tree's attack radius. Richter poured all of his points into *Ranged Attack*. Prompts flooded his vision.

*Congratulations! You have purchased the War Badge: **Ranged Attack I...***

Congratulations! ...

Congratulations! ...

*Congratulations! You have purchased the War Badge: **Ranged Attack IV.***

*Ranged Attacks by your war party now cause **20%** more damage.*

*Total War Points Remaining: **301***

The fifth rank would cost two hundred and seventy-five War Points.

He could buy one of them, but it would wipe him out. That was fine with Richter though. He hoped they wouldn't get within range of the tree, but battles rarely respected his wishes. He poured points into *Melee Defense* and another cascade of prompts filled his view.

*Congratulations! You have purchased the War Badge: **Melee Defense I...***

Congratulations! ...

*Congratulations! You have purchased the War Badge: **Melee Defense III.***

*Your war party now has **15%** greater defense against melee attacks*

*Total War Points Remaining: **126***

Last, he invested in his party's *Ranged Defense*.

*Congratulations! You have purchased the War Badge: **Ranged Defense I...***

*Congratulations! You have purchased the War Badge: **Ranged Defense II.***

*Your war party now has **10%** greater defense against ranged attacks*

*Total War Points Remaining: **51***

With the new badges bought, he chose his war party. Sion was assigned the *Scout* position, Caulder became the *Tank* and Richter assigned one of the Life magi named Heval as the party's *Healer*. Richter added Kentyiro and the three other sprites, as well as Sedrin and three other guardsmen. As his Companion, Sion didn't take up a slot in the war party

which brought the “total” party members up to eleven. That was a full complement for his *initiate* War Leader skill. Richter handed out four more mana potions to each of the sprites, telling them to drink it just before starting to imbue their arrows.

“We’re going to test your control, boys. I want you pouring almost every ounce of magic that you can into this opening salvo. Don’t risk full mana depletion, I don’t want you to crash or risk a mana migraine, but give it everything you can. I think we should be safe at this distance, but we don’t know exactly how this will go. Also, I don’t like the sound of this thing’s *Spawn* attack. So stay frosty, everyone. Ready?”

They all nodded, so Richter simply said, “Let’s do this.”

Richter downed a mana potion to offset the drain he was about to experience, and quickly drew back his arrow and started imbuing. All five archers were using dual-enchanted moonstone arrows. They were enchanted with *Multishot* up to rank IV and *Freeze* to rank II. They were almost the most powerful enchantments he had ever made, and were probably worth nearly a hundred gold each. He had thought of them as his “showstoppers,” but now he hoped they just killed this thing before it could kill any of his people.

“Fire at one second intervals!” Sion commanded loudly. “Do not risk

instability in your imbuelements. If the mana you're channeling begins to escape your control, then fire! If that happens, the man to your left will fire next one second later and so on. Let's reclaim our pixie!" The meidon sprites had been practicing imbuing enchanted arrows over the last day, something that went against all their training. Sion had demonstrated that it was possible to meld the magic in an arrow with their newly enhanced racial skill though, and so they had gotten on board.

Only one of the *Multishot* arrows kept the initial level of imbuelement, but the copies still maintained a weaker version of the imbued magic, doing serious damage. As far as Richter knew though, this was the first time they had imbued a dual enchanted arrow, so Sion's warning was well said. The sprite looked at Richter, "We fire together." The chaos seed nodded back.

Five lights sprung into being. Four were a rich blue and the fifth was pure gold. The glows deepened in intensity as more mana was poured in. Fine streaks of lightning appeared as each sprite drew on their connection to their meitu'pixie and Richter drew on his bond with Alma. The extra effects were gold, yellow, blue and black, reflecting the magic inherent to their pixies. The lightning surrounding Richter's own arrow was the blue-white of psychic energy.

Two hundred, four hundred, then six hundred points of mana went into Richter's shot. The powerful mana potion he'd drunk was restoring his

magic, but not nearly as fast as he was draining it. His imbue ment began to look like battling shells of gold and black. Richter pulled on his *Psi Channeling* ability and siphoned off Alma's mana. The dragonling willingly gave everything she could to her master.

The first sprite released.

A blue streak shot toward the abyssal tree. It had shown no signs of life up to this point, but it immediately reacted to the threat. A screech split the peace of the forest and its tentacles began writhing like a den of disturbed snakes. Several dozen ropy vines extended towards the arrow with the intent of intercepting it before the projectile could damage the tree itself. That would have been a good idea, but after the arrow crossed half the distance, it blurred and five arrows took its place. All of them veered at a slightly different angle, barreling toward the monster. Four more shots followed right behind it.

The tentacles intercepted three of the first multi-arrows. The tentacles struck were blown apart and the other two gouged large holes in the wooden base. The screaming of the tree increased in volume and fury. Hundreds more tentacles shot towards the arrows. Only two of the next ten multi-arrows struck the trunk, but the others all exploded and devastated many of the tentacles. Large swaths of the thick green vines were obliterated. Still others were frozen solid by the *Freeze* enchantment on the arrows. These

shattered a moment later in the concussive blasts of the exploding imbued arrows.

Sion and Richter had waited longer to shoot. Both of their mana pools were much deeper than the other three sprites and so they were able to invest much more into their shots. Richter had been holding on to maximize the effect of their joint attack, but the magic of the imbuelement was starting to feel like a lubed eel in his mind. Just when he was about to release, Sion shouted “Now!” and fired his own arrow. Richter did the same.

Twin bolts of blue and golden-black magic shot towards the tree. Though many of the other three sprite’s arrows had been intercepted, the shots hadn’t been wasted. They had destroyed a great deal of the tentacles on the side of the tree the archers were facing. That had been Sion’s plan all along and was the reason he had ordered the other sprites to stagger their shots. The two Companions had both aimed for the hole in the abyssal tree’s defense without needing to verbalize it. Their arrows split and the copies interwove, now ten promises of magic and death. The tree managed to block one of them, but the other nine all impacted against the trunk with devastating results. Richter’s combat log came alive.

BEGIN COMBAT LOG

***Abyssal Gobrit Tree** is immune to **Mind Fog**.*

***Abyssal Gobrit Tree** is immune to **Stun**.*

***Abyssal Gobrit Tree** suffers from **Psi Crystallization**.*

***Richter** strikes **Abyssal Gobrit Tree** with Enhanced Imbue Arrow for **1,053** points of varied damage with primary arrow (base Piercing=65, base Magical Force=364): $[(+17 \text{ Recurve Bow of the Wood Sprite} + 8 \text{ Moonstone Arrow} + 3 \text{ Water Damage}) \times (20\% \text{ War Badges} + 34\% \text{ for level 17 Archery} + 76\% \text{ for 38 points of Dexterity})] + [(817 \text{ Mana}/5) \times (85\% \text{ for level 17 Imbue Arrow} + 38\% \text{ familiar level})] - 9 \text{ Armor}$.*

6-foot radius AoE Damage (not including modifiers): 364

***Richter** strikes **Abyssal Gobrit Tree** with Enhanced Imbue Arrow for **156** points of varied damage with copied arrows (base Piercing=65, base Magical Force=364/4): ... $\times 4$ arrows*

*Total Damage: **938***

END COMBAT LOG

That one attack had drained his entire mana pool and most of Alma's besides. That single enchanted moonstone arrow was also probably worth the equivalent of one thousand bucks when The Land had just been a game,

maybe much more seeing as how it had been dual enchanted. He had literally just hit the tree with everything he had, an attack that left his head spinning from mana depletion and that he could not have repeated for long minutes until his MPs regenerated. Like his uncle used to say though, it's okay if you blew your load, as long as you got the money shot!

Many of the abyssal trees tentacles went limp, and its roar had turned into a strained mewling. Richter could also see its trunk now. The wood was black and gnarled. Broken branches stuck out from its center like spines on a cactus. Most of the gobrit's low hanging limbs had been snapped off completely after the powerful attack. A large maw yawned open and a number of bones littered the ground beneath it. Another quick check with *Analyze* showed that it had barely over two hundred health left.

"What the fuck?" Caulder blurted out, having witnessed the full power of Richter's Profession for the first time. Even fifty yards away, the party was being pelted with pieces of obliterated vines and all of their ears were ringing from the concussive *booms!*

"Yeah," Richter replied with a cocky smile. "I'm nice like that."

"Shut it!" Sion snapped, shutting down his friend's preemptive victory lap. "The battle isn't done. Nock another volley!"

"No," Richter countermanded, holding up a hand. He drained a mana

potion and fed another to Alma while the sprite looked at him in surprise, “It’s almost dead. I don’t know if the pixie was killed by our attack, but it deserves a shot at being saved. All of you stay here. I’ll finish this.”

Not waiting for the inevitable protests, Richter started sprinting forward. He downed a mana potion and sent a message to his familiar, **Are you with me, love?**

Through death, the dragonling replied, flying above him.

Psi Blast, Soul Trap, Lightning, Drain.

Alma sent back her assent.

Richter had crossed the distance in seconds, using his Cloud Running skill to pick up even more speed. The demon tree had been reeling from the devastating imbued attack, but it rallied in response to his presence. With an almost human scream, it sent all of its remaining tentacles towards him. A small wooden creature detached itself from the trunk and sprang towards Richter with two taloned arms outstretched. Richter changed his trajectory, pushing off the air. His stamina plummeted but he was able to dodge both the creature and the tentacles.

It tried to reorient on him, but Alma triggered her narrowest and most powerful *Psi Blast*. The psychic attack was greatly magnified by the *Psi Crystallized* debuff that was afflicting the gobrit tree. The blue-white psi

crystal hovering near the trunk channeled and amplified her Thought attack. All the tentacles fell limp and the spawned wooden demon collapsed to the ground. A brief golden glow surrounded the tree as Alma cast *Soul Trap*; her body began to glow yellow as she prepared to release lightning.

Richter kicked off the air one more time and landed next to the trunk. He quickly scanned the wood and saw a knob on the trunk that looked like crystallized sap. The chaos seed used *Analyze* and his heart soared. It was the pixie! Flexing his knees, he jumped as high as he could. One more push took him up to the level of the cloudy crystal. His vision blurred a bit as that final jump used almost all of his remaining stamina, but he shook the feeling aside and focused on the task at hand. At the apex of his jump, Richter drew his moonstone short sword and plunged it into the wood of the tree. The abyssal creature made no response, still overcome by Alma's psychic attack.

Using the white blade as a handhold, he drew his elementum blade with his free hand. The wood of the abyssal tree was tough, but it still gave way to the fey metal of Richter's green blade. Feet planted against the trunk, he swung his elementum blade four times. On the fourth swing the tree shivered and its tentacles began to twitch. Not having time to sheath it, Richter dropped his green elementum short sword.

The enchanted weapon tumbled through the air, falling flat on the ground. As the tree began to howl, Richter reached his strong fingers into the

wedge he had hacked into the trunk. Sap, thick and dark as blood in the moonlight, ran over his fingers as he pulled the chunk free. In the center of the freed piece of wood was the pixie chrysalis. With a tearing that felt like meat separating, the wood finally came free. Holding the slumbering pixie in the crook of one arm like a running back, he pushed against the trunk with both feet, freeing his moonstone blade in the process. Richter flew backward as the tree fully shook off the effects of Alma's *Psi Blast*.

The loss of the pixie shook the gobrit tree from its stupor, and it roared as loudly as it had at the beginning of the battle. Its vines began to surge toward Richter's falling body, but Alma latched onto the trunk and siphoned its last health away. Even as the chaos seed turned in midair, activating Cloud Running again, the tree was paralyzed by the dragonling's *Brain Drain* attack. Richter glided safely to the ground and the abyssal creature died, leaving The Land a safer place, if only for the day.

Richter stood in front of the slain monster that towered above him. Alma finished her meal and flew into the air, trumpeting her victory. A small sleeping life lay cradled in the chaos seed's arms. After Alma's call faded away, everything was quiet; even the small animals of the forest remained still until Shinecatcher spoke up...

"Well, that was exciting!"

CHAPTER 60 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



Prompts flooded Richter's vision.

*For slaying one **Abyssal Gobrit Tree**, you have been awarded 70 War Points! (War Points multiplied by 10 for slaying an Abyssal Creature)*

Total War Points Remaining: 121

You have captured:	Durability: 35/35
Soul of an Abyssal	Item Class: Unusual
Gobrit Tree	Stone Level: Special
	Soul Level: Special
	Status: Filled
	Weight: 0.5 kg



Quest Update: **Sakeru I**

You have found and defeated an abyssal creature! Clearly the dangers Elora warned you of were not idle speech. The abyssal tree could have spoiled your entire domain if left unchecked, but you are triumphant!

Return the *sakeru* pixie to Elora to claim your prize. Further rewards will be provided for reclaiming more of her lost children.

Richter dismissed the prompts. Having trapped a *special* level soul was awesome, but the only thing holding his attention was the small life cradled in his hands. The sleeping pixie was a male and, judging by his golden hair, was associated with Life magic. The child was curled in a fetal position inside of the crystallized sap. It didn't seem like there was any way the small creature could be breathing, but *Analyze* showed that he was alive. Richter tried to cast a spell of healing, but though the magic manifested, the hardened sap seemed to insulate the pixie from both harm and care.

He looked around at his party. Everyone had made it through the battle unscathed. Powerful though the tree had been, it was still a stationary monster. Maybe if it had spawned more creatures it could have posed a danger to his party. All Richter could think was that despite its inherent strength, its low level had limited its abilities. He couldn't help but

contemplate how vulnerable the Quickening would be if it was attacked. It didn't bear thinking about.

The good news was, his party was more or less at full strength, though they'd used all of the multishot arrows. Now it was time to make a decision.

Richter waved everyone in, then addressed Sion and Caulder, "I need you to take the pixie back to Elora."

"I cannot leave you in the wilds, my lord," Caulder protested.

"He's right," Sion agreed. "You have no idea how strong this nest of undead is going to be. We should stay with you."

"No," Richter replied shaking his head. He had already thought this through. "I will not take this pixie into battle with us. I can't even risk putting him in my Bag of Holding; it might kill him. He has to be returned to the village now."

"Then send a five-man strike team," Sion rebutted.

"I am, and the two of you are leading it. The pixie has to be protected, and we just found a damn demon in our lands. I know, I know," he said, waving Sion to shut up, "but the point is, the forest is more dangerous than ever. I need to be sure that the pixie gets back to the village safely, and that means sending my strongest fighters. I am sure I'll be able to deal with whatever I find at the kindir's settlement."

Sion didn't like what he was hearing. Despite the fact that he was Richter's best friend and Companion, however, he also had a racially-ingrained loyalty to the pixies. He yearned to see the small flyer back to safety as well. He thought for a second before responding, "I'll go, but I'm not taking Caulder. He's your strongest defender, and you'll need him when the fighting starts. Also, he's too slow. I'll take two other sprites with me. We'll cover twice the distance in half the time. You know that. Besides, even though that tree is dead, we can't just leave it there. The wood needs to be harvested. I'll lead a large team back to gather it."

Richter looked at his friend, loath to send him without a full strike team, but the sprite was right. The Woodcraft ability and the sprites' ability to climb trees let them move like wraiths through the forest. Having Caulder along would just slow them down, increasing the time they were out in the open and most likely drawing attention to them. The tree might also let them create some powerful weapons or items. Richter nodded his assent to the plan.

Nodding back, Sion put the crystallized sap the pixie was cocooned in into a plain brown pouch. After tying it to his waist, he chose another two sprites to accompany him. Before passing out of sight, Sion looked back at his friend. Richter bid him goodbye with a faint smile on his face. The sprite returned the grin and then turned and was swallowed by the trees.

Richter looked at the tree for a moment and made a decision. Moving both hands, words of Power fell from his lips. The mists started to gather at his feet. They rose and formed a grey construct, and soon a mist worker stood in front of him with its featureless face. His masterwork Summoner's Ring let him increase the level of his summoned creature by five. With his dual casting, he'd raised a level eight mist worker.

The chaos seed took an axe from his bag. It wasn't enchanted, but it was made of good quality high steel. He put the weapon in the mist worker's hand. The construct followed him to the base of the tree. He gave two simple instructions. Chop the tree down. Don't die. It was somewhat ridiculous to have to give that second order, but the mist workers had no sense of self-preservation. They would walk off a cliff if ordered to do so.

Alma dropped her new Psi Crystal into his hand once the mist worker got to work. It was only level three, but still better than nothing. The *thunk* sound of the mist worker's axe filled the air. Richter knew it might very well attract predators once the war party left, but at least the work would be partially done by the time Sion returned.

"Let's move out," Richter told the rest of his party.

With a now-reduced party of nineteen and one Shinecatcher, they made their way forward again. Thankfully, there weren't any further attacks.

Alma noted several predators, but they shied away from the party. As they traveled Richter earned a prompt.

You have learned the (Item) enchantment: **Heal, Level I**

Enchantment Size: 3

Enchantment School: Life

Effect 1: *Heal* – Each rank:

- 1) Restores 5 Health
- 2) Increases the number of times the enchantment can be used per day. Ratio: 1 use every 4 ranks

Richter was more than happy to have unlocked such a useful enchantment. His Ring of Healing was still one of the most useful items he'd ever found. It didn't restore much health, but it could be used instantly. He was already envisioning his army equipped with these rings. He had to start crafting rings ASAP. He immediately started channeling his mana into another enchantment, pulling on Alma's mana pool periodically to speed the process. Only a few miles later another prompt appeared, the color of golden Life energy.

You have learned the (Item) enchantment: **Life's Radiance, Level I**

Enchantment Size: 4

Enchantment School: Life

Effect 1: *Life's Radiance* – Each rank:

- 1) Makes Life magic and creatures 1% more powerful
- 2) Makes Death magic and creatures 1% less powerful
- 3) Increases range and size of enchantment. Variable due to item being enchanted.

*This can only be applied as a Macroenchantment

Richter had finally found a Macroenchantment. It was the one branch of his Profession he hadn't invested in, mostly because of a lack of objects to enchant. Macroenchantments included buildings, walls, golems, siege engines and other large projects. According to Gloran, such enchantments required large amounts of soul stuff. With all of the demands on his time, he just hadn't gotten around to exploring that part of his Profession yet. That would have to change. It seemed like he could now make defenses to protect his settlement from the undead. A pillar that did something similar had been integral to him unlocking his second Power. Richter definitely planned to

start experimenting with this enchantment as well.

He had unlocked level two of both of the new enchantments, but rather than invest the days and weeks required to learn them, he decided to focus on learning more level one enchantments. Richter channeled his excess mana into learning *Briar*.

After another mile, the kindir announced, “We are here.”

Richter looked around, seeing only more unbroken forest. The only difference was that the nearby trees were growing very close together. The party had actually needed to cut through the brush in some places over the past thirty minutes. Now they were standing up to their knees in undergrowth. Everyone was sweating, scratched and irritated. More than once, Richter had wondered if the insane kindir was actually just leading them on a wild goose chase as a twisted joke. Even Alma, flying overwatch, saw only unbroken trees “Here?” he asked, some of his annoyance bleeding through.

“This way,” Shinecatcher replied brightly. Richter’s irritated tone just slid off the kindir like oiled crap on wet rock. Someone had once told him that analogy didn’t make sense. His response was that they’d never had curry nachos in Tijuana.

The small man led them up a hill, walking straight into a mass of

hanging ivy. To Richter's surprise, the kindir spoke an arcane phrase and the vines parted. They rose like the two sides of a curtain, and a clear corridor was exposed. Shinecatcher walked through the opening and, after a moment, Richter and the war party followed.

They moved into a short tunnel. The walls were half earthwork and half rock. Small bugs crawled in and out of holes in the walls. Hanging roots brushed Richter's face as he walked. In no time at all they were through and caught their first sight of the kindirs' hamlet.

*Congratulations! You have found a **Significant Location**: Hidden Kindir Hamlet.*

The entire area was about a quarter mile in diameter. The magically hidden glade was comprised of gently swelling hills, none higher than five feet. On each hill was a small house. These weren't hobbit holes. These houses were actually built on top of the hills, but they still seemed to be grown as much as built. Each was constructed of wood and clay daub. They also had vines and small trees growing next to them, with plants incorporated into the structures. "Quaint" was the word that came to Richter's mind.

Small windows, some circular and some square, were set randomly into the sides of each house, almost as an afterthought. Some were on the sides, some were almost skylights and a few were so low to the ground that

Richter had no idea what the point of them would be. Who would look out of a window that was only six inches from the floor? They were all made of random panes of glass, some stained and others clear. To Richter, the houses looked like a manifestation of Shinecatcher's personality, a hot mess that somehow worked.

Trees grew throughout the glade, creating a thick canopy above. More than enough sunlight came through to make the hamlet a cheery place, but it explained why Alma couldn't see anything from the air. The magic enshrouding it also probably played a role. Between the thick brush surrounding the hamlet and its concealed location, it was easy to see why no one from his village had had any idea that the settlement was here.

One or two kindir had been in view as soon as they'd left the tunnel. They initially looked alarmed at the appearance of a group of armed men and women, but Shinecatcher's smiling face seemed to quickly allay all suspicion. The sound of a child laughing came from somewhere ahead. Shinecatcher waved to one of the women, who responded with a rude gesture. Richter noticed she still flipped her hair coquettishly and shot him a telling glance. Shinecatcher winked at the chaos seed. "She loves me," he added confidentially.

The small man led the party along a cobblestone path between the hills. The path split right and left as they walked, providing an easy track to

each home. More kindir took notice of them. They also seemed not at all concerned, and most of them joined the procession. Soon Richter's party was assaulted on all sides by inane babble. Richter started thinking that it just might not be the worst thing if the kindir settlement was wiped out. He didn't want them dead per se, just... not *here* anymore.

They finished their walk a few minutes later in front of a larger hill. It had the only two-story house that Richter had seen so far. Cut into the front of the hill was a series of steps. Shinecatcher ascended them without waiting. Richter followed him, but when the rest of the party started climbing, the kindir told them to wait. The chaos seed nodded in assent. His party agreed unhappily, now surrounded by several dozen chatting kindir with open mouths and sticky fingers.

Richter entered the building and found himself in a clean and nice-smelling common room. Several wooden tables were set up, giving it the appearance of an upscale inn. A bar lay along the left-side wall, though it was unmanned. A large keg rested on its side with cups and mugs conveniently placed nearby. Three silver-haired kindir, two men and a woman, were sitting at one of the tables. All three were drinking from large ceramic tankards. Richter started to greet these three venerable elders, but then one of the men turned his head and addressed Shinecatcher. In the crotchiest of crotchety voices he said, "Took you long enough, you worthless

snot rag!”

Richter’s eyes widened in surprise. Shinecatcher just took it in stride, “Grandfather, it was not my fault. I went to the village as quickly as possible. I flew like the wind! On the way back however, these brave adventurers fought against a demon in the forest. And then-”

“The only demon I’ve ever cared about is the one in my skirts,” the woman interjected with a dirty cackle. “Are you *brave* adventurers wanting to try and conquer that one?” She fixed Richter with a leering and rheumy eye.

“Uhhhh, no?” Then Richter realized that it sounded too much like a question, so he repeated firmly, “No!”

“Heh,” she cackled again, then added dismissively, “you could not handle it anyway.”

Shinecatcher had walked over to the bar and started pouring himself an ale.

“You are excused,” an elder told him.

“Are you sure, Flit? I feel like I could add a great deal to the conversation. At least until I finish my-”

In a smooth motion, Flit took a small crossbow that had been hidden under the table and fired. The bolt flew unerringly across the room and

shattered the mug Shinecatcher was holding. Ale and ceramic pieces showered the kindir. Without losing a beat, he rerouted his statement, “-but you are obviously not fucking around. I will be leaving now.”

With a smile on his face, Shinecatcher exited the building two point seven seconds later. Meanwhile, Richter was just left watching wide-eyed. The chaos seed was sure that demonstration with the crossbow hadn't just been to get rid of Shinecatcher, though that did seem like a worthwhile use of a bolt, in his opinion. No, the elders had just shown that they were not to be underestimated. Richter could understand that, but he also didn't want to waste time verbally sparring. Daylight was burning.

“Thank you for inviting me into your settlement,” he began. “My name is Richter and I am the Master of the Mist Village. I hope that I can help you with your monster problem.”

“Hmph,” one of the elders responded. “Introductions first, I suppose. We welcome you to the hamlet of Verget Kunig. My name is Flitwalker. You may call me Flit. This is Glintgrabber, and our beautiful companion here is Jewel.”

“Just Jewel?” Richter asked.

She smiled at him, showing the five teeth she had remaining in her mouth. Each had a small precious stone embedded in the front. It was

actually more of a leer than a smile.

“Ask a stupid question,” the chaos seed muttered to himself. “Like I was saying, we’re here to help you with your undead problem.”

“No,” Glintgrabber rebutted. His voice was as craggy as the others. “You are here to learn how we can see in your enchanted mists. That type of knowledge is valuable, and I believe we could be persuaded to trade for it. If you are here for any other reason however, feel free to tell me that I’m wrong.” From his tone, it was clear the kindir knew he wasn’t.

Richter looked back at the elders with an inscrutable expression. Then his face broke into a rueful smile. “Can I join you at your table for a drink or will you fire that crossbow at me as well?”

“Ha! I knew there was something I liked about you. Grab a mug and sit down. You can even bring your lizard.”

Is he speaking about me? the dragonling thought indignantly from her perch on his shoulders.

Richter soothed his familiar and filled a mug. Taking a sip, he was pleasantly surprised. The lager was smooth and had a slightly sharp and sweet aftertaste, like berries left in the sun.

“Better than you are used to, pretty thing?” Jewel asked.

“Yes,” Richter said, favoring her with a smile. If the dirty old woman

was horny, then he'd show her a little wiggle. She wouldn't be getting any sugar though!

He sat down, ready to speak, but Flit held up a hand. He slowly reached down and pulled a small blade from his boot. He didn't make any threatening gestures, and Richter was pretty sure he could take the old coot even without Alma's help, so the chaos seed wasn't worried. Then all three elders lifted their mugs and waited for Richter to do the same. Once he did, Flit spun the dagger, and it ended up pointing roughly at Jewel. She downed her drink in one long pull. She slammed the mug back down on the table, and then looked pointedly at Richter. Getting the hint, he chugged as well. Flit and Glintgrabber did the same in succession. Despite the fact that it was only ale, the brew went right to his head. A debuff icon appeared in Richter's vision.

*You have received a Debuff: **Mildly Tipsy.** -2% Concentration. -1% Judgement. -3% Perception.*

A couple of his secondary attributes had taken a hit. He knew from experience that his high Constitution would help clear the effects quickly, and had most likely ameliorated some of the effect. From the parties at the village, he had learned there were several levels of the "drunk" debuff. It went from *tipsy* to *drunk* to *faded* and *inebriated*. After that came: *sauced*, *smashed*, *cockeyed*, *pissed*, *blotto*, *stinko* and, strangely, *jeffrey*. Each level

had ranks of *mildly, moderately, severely* and *completely*.

Krom told him once that the first few ranks were for “wee women that had barely touched their fifth cock.” There were levels of drunk that you had to train to achieve. Richter wasn’t sure, but he thought he might have gone past *inebriated* once all the way to *cockeyed*. Of course, by that time, he was feeling no pain! It very well could have been a hallucination. He also remembered rapping “Hello, Nasty” as well as the Beastie Boys that same night, so all those memories were suspect.

Flit looked at him, “Are you game for another drink? Or have you had enough?”

To Richter’s surprise, a quest prompt appeared.

You have received a Quest: **For Love of Blotto!**

The elders of the kindir settlement have decided to test you. In true kindir fashion, their reasoning does not appear to align with logic, but they must believe that getting you blackout-drunk before fighting a dungeon full of undead is a good idea. They will not be parting with the secret to their immunity to the mists for free, and engaging them in their drinking game might improve your negotiating power.

Success Conditions: Outdrink at least one of the kindir elders

Reward: Each round of drinking that you engage in will improve your

final Relationship boost.

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: Decreased relationship and negotiating power with the kindir elders.

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

“You know, I already accepted a quest from Shinecatcher,” Richter told them, with barely any slurring to his words. “He said if we killed the undead, then you would give us the secret to your immunity.”

“Did he?” Jewel asked with a crafty look in her eyes.

Richter was about to say “Yes,” but then he stopped. Accessing his quest log, he read through the *Helping Hand I* quest. As he read the last line, he gritted his teeth and thought, Motherfucker!

Reward: Introduction to the kindir elders to learn the secret of their immunity to the mists.

It didn’t actually say that these bastards *had* to give him anything. Just that he’d be given an introduction. Seeing as how he’d already gotten the reward and accepted, he might actually be penalized if he didn’t destroy the nest... even without getting the secret to their immunity. The penalty for

failure wasn't even listed. It just said "Unknown." They'd played him!

He'd have to read any quest prompt in detail before accepting from now on. Richter was beginning to understand why some cultures shot kindir on sight. They didn't just steal your coin purse. They'd stolen his faith in his fellow man!

"Fine!" Richter snarled, accepting the quest. "But we're not drinking this Capri-Sun/Zima bullshit. If we're going to drink, then we're going to drink!" So saying, he pulled one of the last bottles of moonshine from his Bag of Holding and set it down solidly on the table.

Richter pulled the top out and poured a shot into each of the kindirs' mugs, and one for himself.

"Are you kidding, boy?" Flit scoffed looking at the small amount of liquid in his glass. "I said we were going to drink, not swish and spit."

"Though that can be arranged as well," Jewel said suggestively, laying a hand on Richter's thigh.

Richter slowly and deliberately removed her hand from his thigh, his *upper* thigh, and set it on the table. "I accepted the quest. Now, Flit, are you going to talk or are you going to drink?"

"Hmpf," the elder responded, but he lifted his mug.

This time Richter spun the dagger. It ended pointing at Jewel again,

who downed the drink without hesitation. As she lowered the mug, she let out a strained wheeze, “Gah! That hit my stomach like a hill giant’s cock!”

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*You have received a Debuff: **Completely Pissed!** -48% Concentration. -52% Judgement. -61% Perception. Offers and people are now much more attractive than they would be otherwise. You are Nauseous. You are quick to anger. +3 to Strength. +131% to Perceived Strength. -15 to Dexterity. You are more likely to break into song. +58% chance to inappropriately touch someone else's face. +312% chance to urinate on yourself.*

Glntgrabber had thrown up first. Despite the foul odor pervading the room, the remaining three competitors glared at each other with iron determination. Flit reached for the half-empty bottle of moonshine as his friend yakked on the floor, held it for a moment, then fell out of his chair. The kindir got back in his seat, fumbled for the neck of the bottle a time or two until he got a handle on it, then very carefully poured another round of shots. He and Jewel moved their chairs so the three of them were equally spaced around the table. The elder spun the dagger once again.

Three rounds later, Jewel went down. The gap-toothed crone had drunk a shot, smiled at them, then her head had just crashed to the table. After a half-belch, half-vomit, she started drooling.

“Wil shee be tokay?” Richter slurred.

“She fine, she fine,” Flit responded with a drunken wave of his hand. He cocked his head and fixed Richter with one eye. “Yuv wanna giv up?”

“Pafaa,” Richter responded with an immediately-regretted scoff. “Thzz iz nothing.” He slammed a fist on his chest. “I’m frum za South. ATL! We drink you shoopid fasdniommbt.” Even he didn’t know what that last word was supposed to have been, but he laughed hysterically at whatever joke he had just made. Richter was ecstatic that Jewel had passed out. Since he’d hit the *cockeyed* level in his alcoholic debuff, old “gaps-in-her-teeth” had started looking like a valid life choice, at least for an hour or two.

They went five more rounds, glaring death at each other one moment and laughing hysterically the next. That was when Richter gained the *completely pissed* rank of the debuff. He didn’t know what rank Flit was at, but it was clear the kindir was hurting. The man was bleary-eyed and was listing back and forth even though he was sitting down. He gave Richter a rueful smile, “You no wha? I lik yu. No! I respek u. Lez stop. We boof win.” He smiled wider and extended a hand, “Friends!”

Richter looked at the kindir and at the nearly empty bottle of moonshine. He burped, and just a little bit of vomit came up. He chewed it back down though... like a gentleman. Then he looked at Flit again and his face took on a first-day-back-in-prison-after-you-had-already-done-your-nickel-but-your-stupid-cousin-chris-started-a-fight-and-you-got-thrown-back-inside-so-you-for-damn-sure-weren't-about-to-punk-out-for-nothing expression. He ignored the proffered hand, glared at the kindir and reached for the mouth of his bag. He fumbled a bit, but then his fingers found the opening. Summoning the item he wanted, Richter slammed another full bottle of moonshine onto the table and shouted, "Spin da fukin dagger! 'Merica, biches!"

Flit's face blanched, but he glared back and spun the dagger. It landed on him and he took another shot. He smiled evilly at Richter, but then looked completely confused. A second later, he threw up on himself. It wasn't much, kind of like a cup of split pea soup that just slowly spilled onto his shirt, but it was enough. The kindir managed a faint, and weirdly innocent-sounding, "Oh no," before he lost consciousness, sitting up and stewing in his own vomit... and pee.

A shitty grin made its way onto Richter's face. He stood up abruptly and threw both arms above his head. "Ya taa-*gluh*!" His war cry was interrupted by his own vomit spilling all over the table. After he was finished

throwing up, he spat onto the floor. Once he felt a little better, he focused on Flit's unconscious form. Richter leaned over and whispered conspiratorially, "Ya-ta." Then, just out of spite, he pushed the elder onto the floor.

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Richter woke up to a bucket of freezing cold water being dumped on his face. He sat up with a cry of outrage that was echoed by three other old and cantankerous voices. One protest in particular stood out, “When did I fall on the damn floor?”

Congratulations! You have completed the Quest: **For Love of Blotto!**

You have drunk all three elders of the kindir village under the table (literally, in two cases). Why this was important to the settlement leaders is completely unknown, and it still seems ill-advised in light of the upcoming foray into a den of undead monsters, but you won! It was only required that you outlast one of them, but you went above and beyond. All rewards increased by 3x for defeating all three elders.

Reward: 375 (base 200 x 1.25 x 0.5 x 3) experience

Reward: +15,000 (base 5,000 x 3) Relationship Points with kindir elders.

Total Relationship Points: **+14,659**

Reward: +15,000 (base 5,000 x 3) settlement Relationship Points of the Kindir Hamlet towards the Mist Village. Total Relationship Points:
+22,813

XP deficit remaining: -97,751

*Congratulations! Your Relationship with Flitwalker, Glintgrabber and Jewel has improved from **Irritable (Level -1: -250 RP)** to **Admiring (Level +6: +10,000 RP)**. “I respect you. I am proud to have you in my life.”*

*Congratulations! The Relationship of the Kindir Hamlet and the Mist Village has improved from **Interested (Level +3: +5000 RP)** to **Steadfast (Level 7: +20,000 RP)**. “You can call upon us in need.”*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 17 in **Trade**. +8.5% to buying and selling.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 4, 5 and 6 in **Diplomacy**! +6% to negotiating power. +6% more likely that representatives from other settlements will take both threats and offers more seriously.*

*You have completed the quest of another settlement. As leader of your own settlement, you have earned Diplomacy Points. The **Mist Village** has received 10 **Diplomacy Points** in regards to the kindir hamlet **Verget Kunig**.*

*Lack of a **Townhall** causes complete loss of any gained Diplomacy Points.*

Current Diplomacy Points (Mist Village → Verget Kunig): 0

Richter was really getting tired of leaving money on the table. He had to get a Townhall! The flare of bright lights from the prompt windows also did nothing to stop the porcupine that was grinding on his brain... metaphorically speaking.

“Uggghhh,” Richter moaned.

Gyoti, came Alma’s draconian and oh-so-feminine judgmental psychic message. Richter ignored her, as was his male prerogative.

Caulder helped him up to his feet, “Did you really get into a drinking match with three kindir?”

“Yeah,” Richter responded, overly loudly. “They’re so small. I can’t believe they drank so much!”

“Don’t you know anything about them, my lord?” the sergeant asked incredulously. “People have been trying to kill them for so long that they have developed natural immunities to most poisons. That spills over into their ability to process alcohol.”

“That is racist propaganda,” Shinecatcher protested.

“But you short bastards do have a racial ability to process poisons and alcohol, right?” Caulder snapped.

“Well... yeah,” Shinecatcher responded lamely.

“Then shut the fuck up!” Caulder told him definitively. Meanwhile, he got Richter onto his feet.

To the chaos seed, it felt like gravity had become untethered. He leaned drunkenly one way then another before the sergeant got him into a seat. Shinecatcher and several other young kindir were doing the same for their elders. A few more kindir were cleaning up the mess and had opened the windows. The smell was already much improved. Not that any of that mattered to Richter, who was in his own personal hell. His debuff had improved after his short nap and impromptu shower, but it was still at the *smashed* rank.

Shinecatcher went behind the bar and brought out a clear bottle containing something that looked like strawberry syrup. He also brought out four small, almost dainty-looking glasses. Each was the size of a shot and had a small stem, like what you would drink port out of after a good meal. He poured an equal measure into each. The bile started bubbling up in Richter’s throat again at the thought of more booze, but the elders had already picked up their glasses and were blearily looking at him to follow suit. After a small, but nasty, burp, he picked up his glass as well. He could outlast these fuckers. If they wanted round two, then they’d get a round two!

Richter downed the red liquid and pure, blessed relief spread through his body!

*You have drunk: **Doc Brown's Wake-up Juice**. This potion removes all ill effects of heavy alcohol consumption and provides +0.5 to all Primary Attributes for each rank of intoxication. You now enjoy the following buff: +4 to all Primary Attributes for one hour.*

Richter's head was completely clear. He looked at all the elders with an astonished smile on his face. The buff was awesome, but what he was really excited about was not feeling like two feet of a dysenteric colon anymore. The elders smiled back at him.

"You just thought we were a bunch of crazy old coots that got heroes drunk before they went into battle, correct?" Jewel asked him with a cackle.

Richter gave a short laugh and admitted that she was right.

All the elders laughed with him, until Glintgrabber's chortle cut short and he thunked his crossbow back down onto the table. "Good! Because I *am* fucking crazy," he said and looked at Richter wild-eyed.

It got creepily silent in the room for a moment, until Flit started laughing again. Everyone in the room chuckled along with him, including Glintgrabber. Richter started laughing as well, but definitely less so than before seeing as how Glint still had that crazy gleam in his eyes and the

crossbow was still *kinda* pointing at him.

“Enough fun,” Flit pronounced. “You have come to our village, you have shown the proper respect, and you can drink! That buff won’t last forever, and I’m sure you’d like to have it when you fight the undead. Let’s bargain!”

Richter’s whole party was allowed into the building now, but Caulder made it clear they were not to drink any alcohol. The chaos seed spared them no attention, his entire focus on the elders and the negotiations that were about to happen. He was pleasantly surprised by the marked change in the three kindir though. Whereas before they had acted like cantankerous old coots, now it was almost like he was the nice neighborhood kid that had always helped them around the house.

Flit wanted to dive right into the negotiations, but before leaving the village, Richter had remembered something about his last trade session with Hafiz’s sons, so he had made preparations for this very moment. Reaching into his bag, he pulled out the gifts he had chosen for the elders prior to leaving his village. Using Shinecatcher as a guide, he’d picked a gift that he thought they would enjoy. He had brought five copies, not knowing how many people he’d be meeting with, so only needing to hand out three was a good result.

Richter laid a dagger and a small pouch in front of each elder. As they unsheathed the blades and opened the small bags, the same two prompts appeared in front of each of them.

You have found:	Attack: 15-19
Moonstone	Durability: 136/136
Dagger of Sonic	Item Class: Unusual
Piercing	Quality: Exquisite
	Weight: 1.3 kg
	Traits:
	+10% Damage vs Spell Barriers
	+7-8 Earth damage*
	12-13% chance to <i>Disarm</i>
	5-6% chance to <i>Shatter</i>
	Ignore 9% of target's armor
	Charges: 476/476
	* +200% vs Air, +300% vs Crystalline

You have found:	Attack: +8
Sonic Moonstone	

Bullets x 20	Durability: 76/76
	Item Class: Uncommon
	Quality: Exquisite
	Weight: 0.03 kg
	Traits:
	+10% Damage vs Spell Barriers
	+7-8 Earth Damage*
	12-13% chance to <i>Disarm</i>
	5-6% chance to <i>Shatter</i>
	Charges: 381/381
	* +200% vs Air, +300% vs Crystalline

Richter had seen the kindir irate and he'd seen them being kind in the last few minutes, but now he saw that they could be serious. All three elders stood. The men bowed and Jewel curtsied. The normal irreverence they exhibited was gone as they each thanked him individually. Then Flitwalker spoke up for the group.

“We are honored by your precious gift, and will honor you in turn with truth. Stories have been passed down about the cruelty of the Masters of

the Mists. Throughout the generations, we were told to be wary of such capricious men of power. When the mists rose again, we sent out our strongest sons and daughters to observe you. The wonders you have enacted in your village over so short a time made it clear that you were a power to be respected. Your initial encounter with Shinecatcher, though not authorized,” the elder shot a sharp look at the younger kindir who just smiled impudently in return, “showed us that you could be reasoned with. I apologize for our initial mistrust. Your wondrous gifts have shown us the great generosity of your spirit. More importantly, now that we have met you, it is clear you are a man worthy of being followed. If you destroy this threat to our settlement, and bring back the body of the undead lord as proof, you will not only gain the secret of our immunity to the mists. You will also gain our trust...” Flitwalker looked at the other kindir who nodded to him before continuing, “...and perhaps much more.”

Notifications flooded Richter’s vision once again.

Congratulations! Your thoughtful and magnanimous gift has greatly impressed the kindir elders. You have gained +7,500 Relationship Points with the kindir elders.

Total Relationship Points: +22,159

Congratulations! Your relationship with Flitwalker, Glintgrabber and Jewel

has improved from **Admiring (+10,000)** to **Steadfast (+20,000)**. “You are someone I can rely upon.”

Quest Update: **Helping Hand I**

You are now promised the secret of the kindirs’ immunity to the mists. There is also a hint of a much greater prize. It is clear to you that this has been made possible due to both your actions and the Reputation that your Fame has earned you. Only by fulfilling this task will you know what the reward will be. Bring back the body of the undead boss to fulfill the dictates of this quest.

Richter blinked. It was the first time in a great while that his Reputation had directly influenced events. Reaching rank five in Fame most likely had countless tiny effects, but living so far removed from other settlements, he didn’t get many chances to see it on a broad scale. The last time it had really come into play was when the second wave of colonists had come to the village.

Fame worked in a number of ways. It had a global effect, which was what had brought the colonists to the village so many months ago. “Global” was misleading because there still needed to be some connection between two areas. Someone on the other side of The Land wouldn’t have any idea

who the chaos seed was. For those that met him, or heard about him though, the effect could be profound.

Richter's Fame had motivated Mama to talk to more people about his sanctuary for non-humans and had given those people a slight push to join him. He couldn't say for sure it was because of his Reputation, but hundreds of people had still chosen to abandon their lives and travel hundreds of miles into a dangerous, monster-ridden forest with their children and elderly in tow.

That was an example of the global effect of Reputation. It also could happen on a local scale though, by reducing prices with merchants, creating opportunities with groups that wouldn't otherwise exist, and opening up new quest lines. Richter had no idea when his Reputation had really come into play on a daily basis, but there was no denying he had a crap ton of quests falling out of his ass. That could, of course, also be due to his status as Master of a Place of Power.

When he'd thought The Land was just a game, that had been the extent of Reputation. It was rarely directly active, but it was immensely powerful in many indirect ways. A conversation with Randolphus though had shown there was a third manifestation of Fame in The Land. Something that Richter had once thought was impossible. He actually had an aura that could tweak events around him in unseen ways. At his current Reputation

rank of five, there was a certain phrase associated with it, “You are a man worth following.” Richter was sure that Flitwalker’s phrasing had not been mere coincidence.

Richter closed the quest update prompt, “I’m honored by your words. Now it’s time to get to work.”

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Shinecatcher led them south out of the hamlet. As always, Alma flew overwatch. They had only gone about a quarter of a mile when the kindir showed them a small hole in the side of a hill. It was only three feet by four feet, and could easily have been missed. As Richter looked at it, however, a prompt appeared.

*Congratulations! You have found a **Notable Location**: Mature Lair*

Richter grunted when he saw the prompt. The fact that it was *mature* meant that the monsters inside had been there for anywhere between a hundred and a thousand years. That didn't bode well.

"The undead have just recently started to bother your people?" Richter asked softly.

Shinecatcher nodded. Richter turned his attention back towards the cave. There was no other movement. He sent a psychic message to Alma, who landed on his shoulder a moment later. The chaos seed took out the

three remaining psi crystals from the Dungeon dive the other day. Richter also had the high-level crystal from the alpha dreemar and the small one from the gobrit tree, but he still wanted to keep those in reserve for emergencies. Alma greedily inhaled all three glowing blue-white crystals.

Total Psi Points: 22

Richter accessed her enhancements window and spent the points.

*You have purchased: **Chameleon I**. Alma can now shift her appearance by 5% to match her surroundings.*

Scratching her neck ridge and telling her he loved her, Richter gave the dragonling a command. She purred slightly in his arms then shot back up into the air. Alma flew in a short circle and landed atop the hill that held the cave mouth. Then she scurried into the entrance, her sharp claws digging into the roof. She waited several seconds for her camouflage to kick in, then slowly moved forward.

The tunnel widened after only a few feet. Though the entrance was small, the floor dropped sharply until there were fifty feet between it and the ceiling. Richter had Alma turn around and face the mouth of the lair. It looked to him as if she was in a man-made structure, though “man” might have been a presumption. Still, it was clear from the remnants of tiles on ground that this had once been a building. A building that had been forgotten

by time and covered by nature. The small hole through which the familiar had entered was all that remained of a once-large entrance filled by a landslide.

Alma continued on. The tunnel turned at a right angle after only a hundred yards. There was no more natural light, but her *darkvision* enchantment kicked in, letting her see with perfect clarity up to one hundred yards. After turning the corner, she immediately spotted something about fifty to sixty yards away. Three skeletons were standing guard in front of a stone doorway. Using the Lead by Example badge of his War Leader skill, he marked each of the enemies. A red triangle appeared over their heads, along with their level.

Every member of the war party stared down through earth and rock at the enemies' location. Caulder cursed softly and Richter couldn't disagree with the sentiment. Even though there were only three skeletons, their levels were high. One was level seventeen, one level sixteen, and the last was level twenty-two. Richter was level thirty-five and Caulder at level nineteen was approaching his Profession threshold. Most of the guards and sprites, however, were between levels eight and thirteen. To put it simply, the war party was outclassed, and those were just the gatekeepers of the dungeon.

The meidon sprites were mostly seasoned fighters, but many of the guards had been manual laborers or bakers until six months ago. Richter and

Caulder looked at each other and just nodded. Neither of them liked the fact that such high-level creatures were the mere gatekeepers for the lair they were about to assault. They would have to put their faith in superior numbers and equipment, and the village's training. It would have to be enough.

A quick check showed Richter that there were about thirty minutes left on the buff he'd gained from the elders. If it faded it wouldn't be a huge hit considering how high Richter's stats already were, but that didn't mean he wanted to waste it. He told Caulder to hunker down at the cave entrance. The Scout War Party position let him know the monsters' levels, but that was all. It wasn't enough info. To really know what his warband would be facing he needed to use his *Analyze* skill. That meant he needed line of sight. It was time to do some recon.

Richter activated *Stealth* and made his way into the cave mouth. The slope under his feet fell at more than a forty-five-degree angle. He was going to abandon his pride and slide down on his butt, but with a smile he realized he didn't have to. Instead, he jumped into the air and used Cloud Running. In seconds, he had silently coasted down to the ground. He gave his eyes a moment to acclimate to the darkness. There was still some faint light coming from the opening but not enough; he decided to cast *Night Vision*.

Everything in his vision became an overlay of greens and blacks. He

surveyed the tunnel entrance, searching for any enemies that Alma might have missed. No creatures came rushing out of the dark, but there was another unpleasant surprise. Blotches of red appeared in his night vision, looking like a Christmas nightmare. The hallway was festooned with traps, and his Pierce the Veil skill made them glow red no matter what type of vision he used. Richter heaved a sigh, saying goodbye to his buff. This was going to take a while.

Richter called Alma back from where she was spying on the skeletons. He jotted down a quick note telling Caulder about the traps and that he intended to disable all of them before coming back up. He also ordered the sergeant to stay outside. If he had to make a speedy retreat, it would be best to have the rest of the party still above ground. Alma flew close and took the note from him while Richter continued his laborious process of trap detection. His Ring of Hidden Dangers came out of his bag, to replace the mana ring he'd taken from the goblin witch doctor.

He made his way through the minefield a few steps at a time. While some of the traps lit up easily, the higher-level ones only revealed themselves after long inspection. At skill level twenty-five in Pierce the Veil, his Perception was fairly high, but that didn't mean he would see everything. All it would take would be him moving too fast over a well-concealed trap and *WHAM!* No more Richter.

Moving at such a cautious speed, it took him about fifteen minutes to get to the end of the hall. He spotted no less than twenty-two traps along the way. Some were simple pressure plates, others were tripwires and there were a few wafer-thin stones that would most likely plunge whomever stepped upon them into spikes, snakes or a vat of acid. He didn't disarm any of them yet; his priority was to *Analyze* the enemies waiting for them.

He finally got to the end, his figure still wrapped in shadows. This far from the entrance there was minimal light but still enough to make his night vision work. His enchanted boots made his already-soft footfalls almost completely inaudible. Peeking around the corner, he finally got within visual range of the undead. Meanwhile, Alma had returned and was holding onto the wall above his head. As soon as the skeletons came into view, he used *Analyze*.

Name: Bodak **Disposition:** Loathing

Bodaks are skeletons that maintain some memory of their former life. Rather than connecting them to the world of life, the memory of what has been taken from them fills their tattered souls with hate and loathing. Their reinforced bone structure and skills make them enemies not to be underestimated.

*Special Attack: **Memories of Life** – Each bodak retains memories, skills and sometimes even abilities from their former life.*

Level: 17

Health: 428 **Mana:** 24 **Stamina:** 291

Strength: 38

Agility: 25

Dexterity: 22

Constitution: 42
Endurance: 29
Intelligence: 2
Wisdom: 4
Charisma: 6
Luck: 9

The three bodaks he was watching moved with more grace than other skeletons he'd fought. Even those had been able to run quickly enough to give him nightmares for a time. They had still shambled though. Grace just wasn't all that possible without sinews or muscles. At least that was what Richter had thought. These three moved easily and with intent.

They continuously scanned the corridor in front of them. Thankfully, between Richter's Stealth level and his Cloak of Concealment, he remained undetected. Two were melee fighters, holding a rusty short spear and mace respectively. Both held iron-bound shields and wore chainmail armor in various states of disrepair. The third made Richter curse inside his head. The skeleton was holding a bow made of dark brown wood, marking it as an archer. It also wore red leather armor that looked reasonably well cared for. The problem wasn't its armament, it was the fact that it was also a Professional Warrior. The way its skeletal face and empty eye sockets scanned the hallway in front of it was just creepy.

Behind them was a small cave entrance. It had to be the way into the

undead lair, and these three were set to guard it. If a Professional was just the gate guard though, Richter was starting to think he may have underestimated the danger they were facing.

He set Alma to continue monitoring the skeletons and made his way back to the warband. Taking out his map, Richter showed everyone what they were facing. Caulder cursed anew when he heard that there was a Professional. “Do you have any idea what Talents it might have, my lord?”

“No,” Richter replied regretfully. “My Analyze skill isn’t high enough yet.”

Caulder nodded and squared his shoulders. “How do you want to approach it?”

“We have no idea how many more undead are beyond the doorway. The opening is too small to risk Alma sneaking past them, especially with a Warrior bowman.” Richter accessed his inventory and looked at one of his new potions. “I have an idea about how to lure them to us, but first I need to disarm the traps below and mark the dangerous spots. In the meantime, tie some ropes to the trees up here and throw them down the hole. If we need to exit the lair in a hurry, we’ll be glad to have them.”

Richter pulled four heavy coils of rope out of his Bag of Holding. The sergeant took them and started doing as instructed. The chaos seed went

back down the hole. Taking two lockpicks from his bag, he got to work.

There was a wide variation between the traps. Some were less than level five while others were level twenty or higher. There wasn't a direct correlation between a trap's level and how long it took to disarm, but it was generally longer for the higher-level devices. Thankfully none of them were false traps, or traps on top of traps. Richter had come to expect those sorts of devious tactics from kobold traps. In comparison, these were straightforward and easy to deal with.

It took an hour, but Richter disarmed them all. He also summoned mist lights and placed them on the floor near the covered pits. It had been a slight risk that the extra light would alert the bodaks, but the glow from the grey orbs didn't travel far. Just to be safe, he had Alma watching the three skeletons the entire time he was working. As they hadn't moved from their posts, he felt it'd been a worthwhile gamble.

Several prompts had appeared while he worked.

You have learned the (Item) enchantment: **Briar**

Enchantment Size: 3

Enchantment School: Earth

Effects: *Briar*. Each rank:

- 1) Allows you to cover the surrounding area in thorns
- 2) Increases the density and number of thorns
- 3) Increases the duration of enchantment
- 4) Increases range and size of enchantment. Variable due to item being enchanted.

*This can only be applied as a Macroenchantment

Another Macroenchantment. It was clear he had only begun to scratch the surface of his Essence Specialty. Richter couldn't wait to convert more spells. He began paying the cost for his next purchased enchantment. One of his skills had also advanced.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 23 in **Trap Disarm**. +46% more likely to disarm traps.*

The cherry on top was that he had been able to salvage several traps.

You have found:	Durability: 14/14
Acidic Breath	Item Class: Uncommon
Trap	Quality: Well Crafted
	Weight: 0.5 kg.
	Traits: Once triggered, a cloud of corrosive gas is

	released, causing 13-17 points of acid damage per second until neutralized or 14 seconds pass
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Dart Trap x 3</p>	<p>Durability: 11/11</p> <p>Item Class: Common</p> <p>Quality: Well Crafted</p> <p>Weight: 0.1 kg</p> <p>Traits: Once triggered, will fire a dart causing 4-5 damage</p>
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Orange Prickle Worm Trap</p>	<p>Durability: 17/17</p> <p>Item Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Quality: Superb</p> <p>Weight: 0.7 kg.</p> <p>Traits: Once triggered, will cover the target in 20-30 orange prickles. These inch-long small summoned monsters will last 5 minutes or until destroyed. Each worm will cause 2 points of damage to both Health and Stamina for each second that they are in contact with a creature's skin</p>
<p>You have found:</p>	<p>Durability: 22/22</p>

Infectious	Item Class: Unusual
Mania Trap	Quality: Superb
	Weight: 0.6 kg
	Traits: Once triggered, this trap will infect the target with a magical illness. Within several minutes, boils will cover the target, causing a small drop in Constitution and a major drop in Charisma. If untreated, psychosis will result within weeks to months. This infection can be spread to others through any fluid contact.

Richter had been happy to get the first two traps. One, because he had almost no traps left and two, because he had wanted to have some traps to study. He was hoping he could discover how they were made and then make his own. The third trap had grossed him out. He wasn't a squeamish guy, but the idea of worms crawling all over him, getting in his nooks and crannies... ugh! It gave him the willies.

His reaction to the orange worm trap was nothing compared to the

horror he felt as he read the final prompt. It wasn't the fact that he was holding a weaponized illness, though that was clearly not the best. It was that he recognized the description from his med school days. It was syphilis! He was holding magical syphilis!

Looking carefully at the trap, he could see there was a small vial in the mechanism. It held a clear fluid with greenish-black blobs floating inside. As he looked at it, he realized he might be looking at the purest expression of evil that had ever existed. Someone had weaponized an STD... What the fuck was wrong with people?

Richter carefully put all the traps into his bag, being extra cautious with the last one. Then he ran back to the entrance. He grabbed one of the ropes and started pulling himself upward. It was times like these that he marveled at the capabilities of his body. Though the slope was steep, he was able to climb up the rope at the speed of an easy jog. Bare seconds passed before he was in daylight again.

He looked around at his men. There were nineteen people with him, not including Shinecatcher. Richter had already formed his war party when fighting the abyssal tree and so couldn't add anyone else. Including himself, he still had nine people though: Caulder, Sedrin, Kentyiro, one other sprite, three other guardsmen and the healer, Heval. The question was whether to take his whole party down into the dungeon or leave some people up top.

Considering the benefits he could give his war party, bigger might not necessarily be better. He accessed the promotions and badges prompt of his war screen.

Promotions

- 1) **Vigilant I:** +5% to Perception of future hidden enemies. +5% to response time to future surprise attacks
- 2) **Sapper I:** +5% to Attack vs an entrenched enemy
- 3) **Subterranean I:** +5% to Defense when fighting underground
- 4) **Overwhelming Odds II:** +30 to Fighting Spirit
- 5) **Weakness Equals Death V:** Champions in your War Party have +25% Attack and Defense vs lower level opponents
- 6) **Slaughter the Innocent II:** +10 Fighting Spirit for one hour per noncombatant life claimed
- 7) **Battle Lord I:** +1 to all base Primary Characteristics for your Champions

Badges

- 1) **Ranged Attack IV:** + 20% more Damage to Ranged attacks
- 2) **Melee Defense III:** + 15% Defense vs Melee attacks
- 3) **Ranged Defense II:** +10% Defense vs Ranged attacks
- 4) **Magical Strength II (Life):** +6% strength of Life Magic

5) Movement Speed III (forest): +30% Movement Speed in forest

6) Skilled Positions:

Tank II: +20% to aggro, +10% Defense, +5% Defense to any ally within ten yards

Scout II: +20% to Concealment, can “assign” enemies and entire party will see their level and position

Healer II: +20% to healing spells, first aid and other healing efforts.
-5% cost to healing

7) Lead by Example: War Leader can adopt the bonuses of any Skilled Position up to rank II

8) Favored Enemy I (goblin): When fighting goblins:

+20% Melee and Ranged Attack and Defense

+12% Magical Strength (all Basic Elements)

+8% Magical Defense (all Basic Elements)

9) Power Level I: 10% of war party’s total experience may be funneled to one member

10) Sphere of Influence I: +100% range of Sphere of Influence

Seeing his progression as a War Leader made his choice easy. The main difference between Promotions and Badges were that promotions had to

be earned in battle. They reflected the actions and deeds of a war party. He had gained *Overwhelming Odds*, for instance, when his warband had fought off an enemy twenty times their number. Badges, on the other hand, were purchased with War Points earned in battle. The higher his rank in the War Leader skill, the more badges were available to be bought. The perks were high enough that anyone in his warband would have a serious edge in battle. Because of that, he wouldn't risk anyone else in the dungeon.

“Caulder, arrange everyone not in the warband to guard this position. If we have to make a speedy retreat, I want to make sure that we're not running into new enemies as we flee the old ones. Then I want our party down that hole. Remind everyone that the mist lights show where there are pits. It's time to get to work.”

“Sir,” was Caulder's simple reply. He clapped a fist to his heart and started giving orders. Two minutes later, the warband entered the lair.

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The plan was simple. They would use the crypt mistress potion to draw the skeletons away from the doorway and into the first corridor. Then they would spring a trap. Ideally, they could take the skeletons down with a minimum of noise. The last thing Richter wanted was fifty more undead spilling in from the next room. It was enough to make him nostalgic for the days of playing simple MMORPGs.

Back then you could draw aggro on a few monsters at a time. You could even rely on mobs stupidly following you while you kited them around a room. Unfortunately, real life was far less convenient. Here, if his warband made too much noise then the undead in the next room could hear and they could notify the entire nest. It was that fear of noise that made him forbid the meidon sprites from imbuing their arrows. If they had any hope of keeping this first battle quiet, they had to avoid the booms that accompanied the sprites' racial skill.

Alma flew forward to spy upon the bodaks again. Thankfully they were in the same place. Then he started dual casting. The first spell was *Summon Weak Saproling*. A five-foot-tall green disc appeared, bringing with it the faint scent of evergreens. It added to the luminescence of the hall, but Richter was casting directly by the entrance. A quick check of what Alma could see showed the skeletons weren't reacting. Once the forest elemental was standing next to him, he cast *Akaton Evolution*.

For the next four seconds, grey light surrounded his hands. The feeling of oneness and contentment that came the last time he used Chaos magic filled him again. He knew in his very soul that this was the Power he had been meant for! A beam of swirling Chaotic energy poured into the saproling and it began to change. The deer-shaped creature reared back on its hind legs and began to shrink. In a few seconds, it had lost half of its mass and was now a solid wood creature with a humanoid form. Thorns studded its body in various places and it had a wreath of small green leaves on top of its head, giving the appearance of shaggy hair.

*Know This! Your spell Akaton Evolution has evolved your **Saproling** into a **Thorn Elemental**, 1 of 3 possible evolutions. Attack increased by +3. Defense decreased by 3. Your new creature is a magic caster. Known Spells: Entangle, Poison Thorn, and Sleep Pollen. Special Abilities: Fire Thorns.*

The little creature stood at the ready. It was only three feet tall, but its mana pool had expanded up to four hundred and eighty-three points. It had less health and stamina than the saproling, but its magical abilities made up for that. Unfortunately, the last two, *Poison Thorn* and *Sleep Pollen*, were unlikely to work against the undead. *Entangle* could come in handy though. Richter made eye contact with it to form a weak psychic bond then cast his next spell.

Green light surrounded his hands again as he dual cast the summoning of his chokespore arachnid. The spider came through a portal and stood in place awaiting instructions. The holes in its abdomen could release hundreds of thousands of spores that would incapacitate anything that breathed them in. Again, not super-useful against skeletons, but he was hoping he could evolve it into something better. A few seconds later, it was suffused with Chaotic energy. It swelled to twice its original size!

*Know This! Your spell Akaton Evolution has evolved your **Chokespore Arachnid** into a **Solvent Spider Queen**, 1 of 4 possible evolutions. Attack +5. Defense +4. Speed -30%. Special Abilities: Acidic Spit, Birth*

The spider was a great deal less mobile, but was undeniably more powerful. Its acid abilities were cool, but the birth ability apparently let it summon tiny versions of itself all with their own acid abilities. Richter was more than pleased.

Everyone else had started coating their weapons with the Sun Lotus Poison. It might have been overkill, but one mistake Richter didn't plan on making was underestimating his enemy. His summoned spider climbed the wall then crossed over onto the ceiling, hanging suspended upside down in the middle of the tunnel. Everyone else hugged the shadows. With his preparations complete and all possible buffs cast, Richter took out the Allure Potion of the Crypt Mistress. He unstoppered the vial and had to fight the urge to immediately vomit. The potion might have been catnip to undead creatures, but to him it smelled like prison sex in June when the AC was out.

Richter walked to the end of the hall and poured it out right before the next corridor began. The smell intensified tenfold and he ran away from it covering his nose and mouth with the edge of his cloak. Alma complained in his mind about the stench, which was saying something. He'd literally seen her eat the ass out of a rat before. Their discomfort didn't matter though. All that mattered was what happened to the bodaks.

The skeletons almost immediately oriented on the end of the hallway they were in. Their teeth started clacking together in excitement. It wasn't a language. If it was, Richter's Gift of Tongues ability would have activated, but he'd be damned if it didn't look like they were talking to each other. First one, then the other two started walking towards the scent. They walked normally at first, but then their weapons started sagging lower as they sped

up. Richter didn't even know how a skeleton could smell, not having a nose, a brain, or any other flesh, but then, how the hell could a bunch of bones even walk around?

Richter watched them through Alma's eyes until they turned the corner. One of the bodak's weapons was actually dragging on the ground behind it. They were all focused on reaching the epicenter of the demoness' musk. Once they did, the two melee skeletons dropped to their hands and knees to be even closer to where the potion had fallen onto the rocky ground. Only the Warrior resisted the powerful lure and still looked around for danger, but it was clearly distracted.

It didn't matter, it was too late. Richter gave three mental commands in quick succession. Each was obeyed without question. Alma aimed her primary attack, *Psi Blast*, at the three skeletons. She narrowed the beam to its strongest intensity and fired. The undead were less susceptible than the living to Thought attacks, skeletons especially so, but most still required mental energy to function. The bodaks' enchanted mentation worked against them, giving her attack even more fertile ground. All three skeletons suffered from *Stun*, one was afflicted with *Disorientation*, and all three took direct health damage.

The spider struck next. Without even detaching from the ceiling, it released its brood. Hundreds of quarter-sized spiders emerged from the holes

in its abdomen. The pure-white spiderlings fell like deadly snow. They festooned the three stunned skeletons and began biting. The damage from their tiny mouths didn't even take away a whole point of health, but the acidic magical damage was another matter entirely. A small green glow came from the bite of every spider. Every moment their mouths were attached, more of the bones dissolved. The skeletons stood there taking hits from dozens of spiders each, the fractions of individual damage adding up to six to seven damage per second.

The thorn elemental executed the third attack even as the spiderlings were falling. At Richter's order, it cast *Entangle*. Roots broke through the rocky ground and wound their way up to the waists of each bodak. All the attacks took five seconds to complete, which was all the time the Warrior skeleton needed to shake off the *Stun* effect. It had barely lost twenty health from the spiderlings and it immediately oriented on Richter's party. Its teeth clacked together as it began to raise its bow.

It didn't get the chance. Richter cast two spells in rapid succession. Two balls of light shot from his hands and affixed themselves to the bodak. It both gave his people a clear view of the undead at the end of the darkened hallway, and signaled his command to attack!

All four meidon sprites released simultaneously. Their shots weren't imbued, but their arrows were coated with the Sun Lotus Poison. Entangled

as the skeletons were, there was no chance for the sprites to miss. Two arrows struck the Warrior and one struck both of the lower level undead.

The damage from the shots was not something to be shrugged off. The sprite bows weren't quite as powerful as Richter's larger version, but each sprite's Archery skill was considerably higher. Each skill level added another 2% to the base damage. The bodaks lost twenty to thirty health from each shot and were rocked back, but that was nothing compared to the poison. At the site of each impact, waves of golden light started spreading through their bony bodies, wreaking more damage every second. One of the melee fighters added to the pandemonium by attacking his fellow. Alma's *Disorient* caused the skeleton to attack one of the only two targets he could reach while ensnared by the thorn elemental's spell.

As great as the poison was, the Warrior bodak was barely fazed. It had lost 30% of its health and was losing more every second from the poison, but the health loss was being resisted. The skeletons were losing twenty-five to thirty-five points of health per second rather than the forty to sixty that Richter had been hoping for. It was just another example of how many factors came into play during battle. Tabia's poison was potent, but the bodaks evidently had some limited resistance to either Life magic or poison in general.

Given enough time, the poison would most likely cause at least the

two melee bodaks to succumb, but Richter wasn't about to let the Warrior use a Talent that would screw all of them. The chaos seed ordered, "Attack!" and the third phase of the trap was triggered. Richter and the other melee fighters rushed forward to engage the three skeletons.

The archer was raising its bow again. Without breaking stride, Richter reached up and drew his elementum short sword. His arm whipped forward and threw the green blade at the Warrior. The elementum blade flew through the air and struck the entrapped skeleton. The blade bit through one of its rib bones and rattled around inside of its chest. The hilt got caught on another of its bones and the blade remained hanging inside of the undead at an angle.

The throw caused another forty-two points of *slashing* and *sonic* damage, but that wasn't the real point. It also disrupted the skeleton's attempt to fire. The arrow it had pulled from its quiver fell to the ground. The skeleton turned its head to glare at Richter, which was just fine by the chaos seed. Thanks to his high stats, Richter was almost a blur while he sprinted towards the Warrior.

With both hands on the hilt of his second weapon, he brought it down with crushing force onto the skeleton's head. It was not his moonstone short sword he swung, powerful though the weapon was. No, this was a weapon suggested by Krom when the dwarf heard that Richter would most likely be

fighting skeletons soon. According to Krom, “The bony bastards have a naturally high resistance to slashing weapons, but they drop to their knees like a grateful wife if ye just smash them!”

That was why they had enchanted the white metal mace he was holding.

Richter strikes Bodak Warrior with Mace for 178 points of varied damage: [(+25 Crushing Damage from Shadow Life Moonstone Mace) x (10% susceptible to Crushing Damage + 6% for level 2 Mace Wielding + 66% for 33 points of Strength) – (8 Armor x 0.87 Ignore Armor) + (+3 Life Damage x 2 vs Death)] x 4 critical strike to head.

The Warrior’s skull fractured and one of its mandibular joints snapped. Its head whipped away from the force of the blow, but then it snapped back, looking right into Richter’s face with its cold, emotionless sockets. Before he could recover, it activated a Warrior Talent from its previous life. While most of its Professional attacks required the use of its bow, *Stun Punch* did not.

It consumed thirty points of the skeleton’s stamina, but that meant almost nothing. The undead burn almost no stamina through their normal exertions. A bony fist struck Richter in the chest just below the clavicle and he lost control of his body. He began to fall, but could still see the skeleton

rearing back to hit him again. Then a black-and-grey streak swooped down and attached herself to the skeleton's head. Richter's internal cursing turned to laughter as he continued to fall. His two summoned creatures attacked the skeleton as well.

You mess with me you mess with my whole crew, he thought as loudly as he could.

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The three bodaks succumbed quickly after that. Richter was only stunned for a few seconds, his high Constitution and Endurance counteracting the debuff. Once the skeletons were destroyed, Caulder quickly formed another skirmish line facing the doorway the three had been guarding. Thankfully, no other undead came through. The ambush had gone swimmingly. Richter was actually the only injury, and the damage he received was minor. A quick healing spell from his familiar was all he needed to be back to full capacity.

Richter quickly absorbed the knowledge from the post-battle prompts.
*You have been awarded **14,762** experience (base 337,418 x 0.07 x 1.25 x 0.5) from Brain Drain against Level 22 Bodak Warrior.*

*XP deficit remaining: **-82,989***

*For slaying 2 **Bodaks**, you have been awarded 8 War Points*

*For slaying 1 **Bodak Warrior**, you have been awarded 20 War Points (War Points multiplied by 5 for slaying a Professional)*

Total War Points: 99

<p>You have captured:</p> <p>Soul of a Bodak x 3</p>	<p>Durability: 20/20</p> <p>Item Class: Common</p> <p>Stone Level: Common</p> <p>Soul Level: Common</p> <p>Status: Filled</p> <p>Weight: 0.3 kg</p>
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Richter had a faint smile on his face, and not just because using *Brain Drain* on the Warrior had given a much-needed XP infusion. Creating the *Soul Trap* arrows was really paying off. There was no way the warband would have had enough time to soul trap all three of the monsters during the ambush without them. The sprites were even able to collect some of their enchanted arrows to use again. The skeletons didn't have any loot besides their weapons and armor which was all low durability and quality. He left it where it was because they couldn't waste time removing it from the bones. Once the dungeon was cleared, they could always grab it on the way back.

Richter hadn't seen any traps when he'd peeked around the corner before but he wanted to check again now that the coast was clear. While Alma flew through the doorway at the end of the hall to scout, he summoned more mist lights, leaving them hanging in the air. Now that it was better lit, he dismissed his night vision and started scanning the room in earnest.

While he searched, he thought back over the battle. Tabia definitely deserved a fruit basket. Her new potions were awesome! The allure potion made from the crypt mistress's ichor was amazing. Not only had it attracted the undead, but they had been so enthralled that their guard had dropped. The Sun Lotus Poison had also performed as expected. Reviewing the combat logs, he saw that the melee bodaks had been able to resist about 20% of the poison's damage and the Warrior about 30%. Still, the poison did as much damage as any of the other attacks. As far as experiments went, the battle had been a resounding success.

While he searched the room, Richter also kept part of his attention on what Alma was seeing. After the doorway, she'd come upon a hallway made of loose-fitting blocks of grey stone. Plants were growing through the cracks in certain places. The only light came from the doorway she had entered through, and it was meager. Thankfully her darkvision let her see easily. The corridor reached a five-way intersection after only eighty feet. She asked Richter what he wanted her to do. All he could say was to keep searching, so

she picked the leftmost fork and kept flying.

With her body already a blackish grey, coupled with her *Chameleon* enhancement it should have been easy to avoid detection. Unfortunately, skeletons without eyes obviously did not rely on traditional methods of sight. That became clear when she turned a corner and a bolt of ice struck her small body.

Alma fell with a cry. Her body struck the ground with a small *thump*, but to Richter it felt like the world itself reverberated. Skeletons started rushing towards her and the caster began another spell. The dragonling had no resistance to Water magic, but her Psi Bond served almost the same role. At level six her bond with Richter increased her Wisdom by 75%, giving her a value of eighty-six. With her attribute that high, she had a strong innate magical resistance. Though she lost some life from both the magic attack and the fall, Alma was no weak creature. She landed on her feet and as soon as she hit the floor she bounded off again.

Alma! Richter cried out to her. He started to sprint towards the doorway.

An arrow struck the ground where she'd been a moment before. She didn't respond at first, just focusing on staying alive. Alma flapped her wings and flew sideways. Her feet landed on a wall and she pushed off

again, flapping for all she was worth. The skeletons chased after her.

No, master! I can come to you, but there are many of them! I do not know how many! Ambush them when they come through the door!

Richter didn't like her suggestion, but he knew she was right. His war party was deadly, but they could easily be overwhelmed by a numerically superior force. He also hadn't forgotten the high levels of the bodak gatekeepers. It was likely that the monsters further into the dungeon would be even stronger.

The lack of light in the tunnels was also a factor. In there, his party would effectively be afflicted with a *Blind* status, and he hadn't even checked the floor for traps. If the snares were of a sufficiently high level, they might only react to foes while letting the skeletons run right over them. Once again, he realized how blessed he was to have such an amazing familiar.

He started giving orders.

"Caulder, make a shield wall ten feet out from the door. Alma's been attacked. She's on her way back, but she's bringing company. Archers prepare to fire into the doorway on my order. On my order! Not before. Imbued shots this time, since we've already been discovered. Life magi, stay behind the melee fighters and defend them. Do not spare the mana potions. Everyone reapply the Sun Lotus Poison. Do not kill my familiar!"

The warband snapped into motion, and Richter began his own preparations. Both of his summoned creatures had returned to wherever they originally came from. They were his primary attack summonings and the cooldowns hadn't elapsed yet. Thankfully, they were not the only creatures he could call upon. The chaos seed downed a mana potion and began dual casting in quick succession: *Summon Weak Gold Fox*, *Summon Weak Life Wisp* and *Summon Weak Bile Rats*. He quickly formed a mental link with each of them by looking in their eyes. The wisp was just a ball of light, of course, but apparently looking at any part of it was enough.

Ever since Hisako warned him about summoning too many creatures, he'd been concerned about his summonings slipping his control. She said he would start to feel it if it happened, but so far, none of his creatures had gone rogue. He cast *Akaton Evolution* on each of the creatures.

*Know This! Your spell Akaton Evolution has evolved your **Gold Fox** into a **Shining Fox**, 1 of 3 possible evolutions. Speed increased by +2. Max Number of Heals increased from 5 to 10. Hit Points restored per Heal increased from +100 to +150. Your new creature exudes an aura of Life energy regenerating 1 Hit Point per second within ten feet affecting allies only.*

*Know This! Your spell Akaton Evolution has evolved your **Life Wisp** into a **Life Will O'Wisp**, 1 of 2 possible evolutions. Defense increased by +1. Max*

Number of Heals increased to 3. Heal ability is now AoE spell with a radius of fifteen feet affecting allies only.

*Know This! Your spell Akaton Evolution has evolved your **Bile Rats** into **Sickness Rats**, 1 of 5 possible evolutions. Attack +3. HPs +30-40 per rat. Bites can transmit a number of weak but communicable diseases.*

The fox's golden pelt obtained a white streak on both sides, and it began to glow. The wisp had originally been a grapefruit-sized ball of golden light, but after it was struck by Richter's Chaotic energy hundreds of tiny motes of golden energy began to surround it and it doubled in size. The bile rats were normally sickly looking, underfed things. Thanks to Richter's Chaos spell, they grew larger and their coats grew healthier, no longer sick themselves but carriers instead.

Each evolution made the summoned creatures more powerful. After casting *Akaton Evolution* the third time, Richter felt a slight strain at his mental connection to the summoned creatures. Not just the bond to the rats, but all three of the links... quivered. Richter focused on strengthening them, acting instinctually. The instability disappeared. He had complete control again, but it made him wonder what would happen when he started summoning higher level creatures.

I'm almost there, master!

Alma's frantic psychic cry brought the situation back into laser focus. Dual casting so many spells had drained his mana substantially. The potion he'd downed was already restoring a great deal of his MP, but he drank another just to be sure. He cursed the lack of time. He could see the dragonling through the doorway now. There was only time for one more spell!

Summoning his magic, Richter's hands began weaving in mirror images of one another. Arcane words of Power fell from his lips and orange-red light surrounded his hands. A golf ball-sized ball of flame snapped into existence between his hands, growing to the size of a tennis ball a second later. By the third second the casting was done, and a baseball-sized ball of fire shot from Richter's hands. It flew through the open doorway.

Alma already knew what he was planning. With a synchronicity that was only possible because of their deep psychic bond, she dove directly under the ball of fire and landed. Trusting in her magic, she cast *Weak Static Life Shield*. A bubble of pure Life energy sprung into being around her. The bodaks, which had never been more than several steps behind, started clacking their jaws together in anticipation of the kill. Then they were immolated.

The baseball-sized ball of flame had expanded to the size of a beachball by the time it struck the lead bodak. The fireball exploded on

contact, flame washing over the skeletons and Alma's protective bubble. The bodaks lacked any flesh, but three of them still started to *Burn*. Alma's shield lost 15% of its health in seconds, but it was still more than enough to keep her safe for a moment.

Hold them for just a bit more, my love! Richter called to her psychically.

The dragonling had bought the party precious seconds. "Start imbuing!" he shouted.

While the sprites started pouring mana into their shots, both Richter and Alma started buffing themselves. While the dragonling prepared for battle, the bodaks began raining blows upon her shield. It had only had one hundred hit points to start with, and the fireball had siphoned a good chunk of those only a moment before. Luckily, the Life shield was the perfect defense against the dead. Its base Defense of +3 was increased to +9 when used against Death creatures. Still, against the combined blows of the bodaks it would succumb in seconds. Alma didn't wait.

After she buffed herself, she launched her body away from the several dozen bodaks who had been bottlenecked by her shield. As soon as she touched the far edge of the bubble, the shield was dispelled. Several bodaks fell to the ground as they had been braced against the edge of the magic

sphere.

The dragonling shot through the doorway with more bodaks right behind her.

“Now!” Richter commanded.

Four imbued arrows shot through the opening and detonated with an earsplitting *BOOM!* In the confined space of the dungeon the sound was enormous, and everyone in the company gained a *Deafened* debuff. It was worth it. Bones flew in all directions as the sprites’ group attack, *Death Lotus*, reinforced the individual imbued arrow strikes.

The bodaks were not finished though. The ice mage miniboss had erected a shield of its own and protected many of the skeletons from the sprites’ attack. The caster then enchanted the other bodaks, adding ice damage to all of their weapons and extinguishing the flames on the few that had been afflicted with a *Burn* status. The first of the skeletons reached the doorway with their weapons raised... and promptly fell down.

Richter hadn’t been idly waiting. In addition to buffing himself, he’d cast *Grease* on the floor in front of the doorway. The skeletons fell and slid in the dark brown slick, delivered almost to the waiting feet of his war party. Caulder used his new Field Advancement, *Rallying Cry*. A bellow issued from his throat, increasing the Attack and Defense of the entire warband by

+1 for the next five minutes. The war party attacked!

More bodaks spilled from the doorway. Richter cast *Weak Flame*, igniting the entire patch of grease. Every skeleton received fire damage as they entered the room. Some fell, but it didn't stop them; the battle was joined! One bodak Warrior made it through the grease without falling and ran directly at Richter. The undead was on fire, taking damage every second, but it was a drop in the bucket compared to its large pool of health. It activated the Warrior Talent *Lunge*. The heavy spear it held shot towards Richter like a bullet. Even the chaos seed's high stats couldn't keep up. The best he could do was to sweep his short sword up to deflect the weapon slightly.

The point of the spear hit him high in the chest. The damn thing punched right through his armor! His chestplate stopped the thrust from going too deep, but three inches still punctured his flesh. Richter growled as the cold enchantment on the blade began to numb his arm. The bodak continued to push, trying to force the spear deeper, but Richter learned a new use of his latest skill. Rather than backpedaling to stop the damage, he activated *Cloud Running*.

He had to drop his short sword, but he still had his moonstone mace in his other hand. Gliding on a cushion of air, he was able to grab the weapon just behind the spearhead. With almost no friction, he just had to straighten

his arm to remove the weapon from his chest. That, of course, caused even more pain to shoot through him, but he was free. Richter used his Ring of Healing. It only restored thirty-four health, but the effect was immediate. Some of the pain eased. Gritting his teeth, he counterattacked.

Richter didn't waste the bodak's momentum. When his two and half seconds of glide time elapsed, his feet fell to the floor. At the same time, he pushed the spear up and pulled it forward with his left hand. With his right, he swung his mace in a wide haymaker. The Life enchanted weapon struck the skeleton with crushing force, shattering several ribs and fracturing a few vertebrae. The Sun Lotus poison infected the undead creature as well, spreading waves of golden light through its body.

The bodak let go of its spear, and grabbed Richter's shoulders. Its empty gaze still somehow radiated malevolence. Bringing up its bony knee, it struck the chaos seed in the face. A fountain of blood erupted from Richter's nose, and his vision went red. All around him, cries of battle and pain rang out.

"Motherfucker!" In that moment of pain, Richter lost himself. All he wanted in the world was to hurt the creature that had just hurt him. Richter growled as he wrapped both arms around the bodak's skeletal legs and lifted it off the ground. "Double leg, motherfucker!" Taking a step forward, he slammed the skeleton down onto its back, his own body on top of it. What

they said was true. You could take the man outta the ring, but you couldn't take the wrestler outta the man.

The two of them landed with a crash and Richter raised his mace to shatter its skull. Before he could finish his attack, a creature formed of pure white ice struck him with a fist the size of a cinder block. Not only did it knock him through the air, it also left him with a debuff.

*You are **Slowed!** -28% to Movement and Attack speed.*

As he sailed through the air, Richter caught his first sight of the skeleton that had summoned the ice creature. The *Slow* debuff was stronger than he could have managed. Not surprising, as the bodak that had summoned it was a Professed Mage. That meant the skeleton was at least skill level forty-five in Water magic, *journeyman* or higher in rank. A far cry greater than his own paltry *initiate* rank in Water magic. Richter gritted his teeth as he landed. He fucking *hated* fighting magi.

Kill the caster, love! he sent to his familiar.

What the hell do you think I'm doing? came Alma's waspish reply. She banked left, narrowly avoiding an arrow shot by a bodak Warrior.

Richter was about to send back his own acerbic reply, but he had other things to deal with. The ice monster's blow had knocked him far to the left. As he got to his feet, he took a split-second to review the battle.

Caulder and his men were maintaining their small shield wall though more than fifteen bodaks were attacking them. The guards had taken some hard hits, but the biomancers and Richter's summoned wisp and fox were healing damage as it came so they were all still on their feet.

The meidon sprites were firing into the crowd of skeletons, but two skeletal archers were firing back from behind the sortie line. One of his archers was down with an arrow in the neck. As Richter watched, the sprite was downing a health potion with one hand while the other was braced at the impact site in a desperate effort to staunch the bleeding. In the doorway, the skeletal Mage was preparing to cast another spell. Blue light surrounded its hands and it stood in the center of a bubble of protective Water magic. An arrow struck the shield as Richter watched, but despite the extra 10% damage to magic shields imparted by weapons made in the Forge of Heavens, it just plinked off.

The Mage clearly felt safe behind its protective magic and was taking the time for a longer casting. That probably meant something horrible for Richter's warband, but luckily, the monster had underestimated Alma.

The dragonling pointed her body straight at the skeleton and fired her primary attack, *Psi Blast*. The Deeper Magic of Thought cut through the Basic Element Shield like it didn't exist. The concentrated beam of psychic energy disrupted the bodak's casting and triggered a spell feedback. In

addition to being afflicted by *Stun* and direct health damage, the skeleton lost its senses and collapsed backwards. The tip of one bony finger brushed the edge of its shield and the protection disappeared.

That's my girl! Richter thought to her.

She didn't actually respond with words. It was more like a smug and psychic, "Heh!"

Then Richter didn't have time to do anything but survive. The Warrior, ice monster and one other sword-wielding bodak were closing on him. The *Slow* debuff was a real kick in the huevos, but his own *Haste* buff, the bonus from his armor and his new *Impassioned* trait really helped defray the damage. Back on his feet, Richter spat a word of Power and cast *Weak Mirror Image*. With his low skill level of seven in Light magic, it only manifested two other copies of himself. They were mere illusions, but they made the Warrior bodak target the copy on his right. Not wasting the opportunity, Richter pushed off and glided on a cushion of air to attack the monster on his left.

The ice creature brought a fist back to strike the approaching chaos seed, but a new word of Power was already on his lips. A gout of orange flame shot from his hand, directly into the summoned creature's chest. It reared back, taking extra damage as Fire magic was anathema to its nature.

Richter finished his attack by swinging his mace into the knee of the other bodak. The Life-enchanted weapon swept through the joint. The distal bones of its leg clattered to the ground.

Richter didn't stop. He kicked off the ground again, moving past his three attackers and diving into a roll. His hand closed around the hilt of his short sword and he kept running towards the skeleton archers in the doorway. Behind him, the ice creature bellowed, sounding like a rage-filled storm. Heavy thuds made clear it was giving chase. Richter just smiled grimly and thought, come and get me, snowcone.

CHAPTER 66 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



The battle raged for what felt like hours, but it was actually concluded in the next ten minutes. That sort of time distortion had become commonplace to Richter as war had hardened him. He stood panting and heaving hard breaths. The shattered body of the skeletal mage lay beneath him. All that remained of the skull were teeth and bone fragments. Several more members of the war party had gone down before the battle ended, but both the biomage and Alma had summoned healing creatures of their own which had kept everyone on this side of death's veil. Without the healing magic, precious few of the party would remain. Even with the magic, three of Richter's people were out of the fight.

One meidon sprite had suffered a shattered humerus thanks to the swing of a bodak's sword. The armor had stopped the cut from going too deep, but the force of the blow had still wreaked serious damage. His arm was fractured in multiple places, something that was beyond the warband's

capabilities to fix. Once again, physics proved that it could be a bitch in any world.

A second guard had a serious concussion and another had lost an eye. Richter's magic could heal simple breaks and mend flesh, but it couldn't regenerate a body part. Neurologic injuries also required a more delicate touch. Richter ordered that the three party members be taken back towards the entrance.

While the uninjured guards helped them back and everyone else replenished their stamina, Caulder approached Richter, "Orders, my lord?"

Richter looked at his sergeant and heaved a heavy sigh, "We need to clear this nest. These things are strong, and worse, they're smart. We can't leave them here and let them get more entrenched. They would only replenish their strength." He reached into his bag and pulled out more potions of healing, stamina and mana regen, "Hand these out. We go forward with the warband members we have left." Richter had considered bolstering their ranks, but the truth was, everyone he had left behind was lacking in both levels and combat experience. In the tight tunnels, less might be more, especially with the war party badges and promotions.

Caulder clapped his fist to his chest with a strong, "Sir!" Then he walked off and spoke encouraging words to the men. Richter gazed after the

man, so thankful to have such a reliable sergeant under his command. The man was worth his weight in gold. A familiar presence settled across his shoulders.

I'm so sorry, master, came Alma's sorrowful voice, **and I'm sorry I yelled at you during the battle.**

Don't worry, my love. No one died, and Hisako can even restore Tet's eye. You have saved us so many times, I'm just glad you're safe.

Richter reached up and brought the dragonling around so he could look at her, **Are you okay?** he asked with concern. This was his first time examining her since the battle, and he knew she'd taken at least one blow with that initial ice blast.

I'm fine, master. I have already healed myself. The extra armor you made me saved my life.

Richter heaved a sigh of relief, **Good.** He had felt pure panic when the Mage had targeted her. It if wasn't for her high magical resistance, she might have been *Slowed*, or worse, *Frozen*. If either of those two things had happened, the bodaks would have torn her apart before he could have saved her. They still needed to search the tunnels, but he wouldn't risk her again.

I will start searching again, and I will be more careful this time.

"No!" he exclaimed. The warband looked at him in surprise and fear,

thinking they were being attacked again. Richter was so against the idea of putting her in danger again that he forgot to keep his thoughts silent. “I won’t-”

I am here to serve, master! she interrupted. **I made a mistake and went too fast. That is why this happened. You cannot always protect me. It is my job to protect you! I will be more careful, but I will not let you enter dangerous territory first! You are my master and you will do as I say!**

Her tone was so stern that Richter blinked in surprise. He was used to her being snarky, but she was rarely firm with him. Her last statement was so crazy that it brought the ghost of a smile to his lips. If that wasn’t the perfect example of ‘angry woman logic,’ he didn’t know what was. Her speech had the desired effect though. It shook him out of his impulse to blindly protect her and made him consider her words.

The fact of the matter was, she was right. Mostly, at least. There was no one better suited for scouting than his familiar. He also knew in his heart that there were even greater trials coming for them both. These monsters weren’t something for them to hide from in fear. In his heart, he knew they were practice. Something much worse was coming. Looking at her fierce draconian face, he thought, **You do realize that as the master, you are supposed to obey me, right?**

She leaned forward until she was right in front of his face. Then she licked his cheek, **That is so cute that you think that, master.** Saying nothing more, she launched herself from his arms and flew back into the doorway.

What happened to the sorrowful dragonling that apologized a minute ago? he thought after her.

Temporary insanity, she sent back with the psychic equivalent of a smirk.

Richter kept a visual feed of what she was seeing firmly in his head while he dealt with the battle prompts.

*You have been awarded **15,785** experience (base 360,795 x 0.07 x 1.25 x 0.5) from Brain Drain against Level 23 Bodak Warrior*

*You have been awarded **6,702** experience (base 153,182 x 0.07 x 1.25 x 0.5) from Brain Drain against Level 16 Bodak*

*XP deficit remaining: **-58,116***

*For slaying 19 **Bodaks**, you have been awarded 76 War Points*

*For slaying 5 **Bodak Warriors**, you have been awarded 100 War Points (War Points multiplied by 5 for slaying a Professional)*

*For slaying 1 **Rime Bodak Mage**, you have been awarded 25 War Points*

(War Points multiplied by 5 for slaying a Professional)

Total War Points: 322

The fact that the mage was a stronger version of the bodaks made sense. It hadn't stopped moving until he had completely crushed its skull. The other skeletons were resilient, but nowhere near as tough as the caster had been. As a mage, it should have been easier to kill. Now that he knew it was a stronger species than the other undead they had met so far, it all added up. The thought made Richter stop a moment, and consider if "species" was the right word though. His *Akaton Evolution* spell showed that monsters could evolve into stronger forms. Maybe Rime bodaks were just an evolutionary leap forward from bodaks. The question was just academic, but Richter stored it in the back of his mind. For now, he was just happy that they had managed to capture its soul along with several others.

<p>You have captured:</p> <p>Soul of a Rime Bodak</p>	<p>Durability: 25/25</p> <p>Item Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Stone Level: Luminous</p> <p>Soul Level: Luminous</p> <p>Status: Filled</p> <p>Weight: 0.4 kg</p>
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<p>You have captured:</p> <p>Soul of a Bodak x 14</p>	<p>Durability: 20/20</p> <p>Item Class: Common</p> <p>Stone Level: Common</p> <p>Soul Level: Common</p> <p>Status: Filled</p> <p>Weight: 0.3 kg</p>
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Most of the bodaks had rusted weaponry of either poor quality or low durability, which was another thing that had allowed his people to live. The bodaks were level fifteen to twenty-five for the most part, and there had been plenty of Professionals. The rime bodak had been level twenty-seven. His people had been outclassed as far as levels went, but their gear was specifically enchanted to protect against and kill undead. Coupled with the high-quality work and strong metals that the village smiths used, it put their armaments *several* classes above the skeletons they'd been fighting.

Richter found one good piece of loot. The rime bodak was wearing a *scarce* class ring.

<p>You have</p>	<p>Durability: 20/20</p>
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found:	Item Class: Scarce
Glimmer Ring	Item Quality: Superb
	Weight: 0.02 kg
	Traits: +12 to Perception of hidden enemies within 25 yards. Concealed enemies will sparkle in your eyesight. Extremely effective in dark areas.

Richter shook his head. It explained why the Mage had been able to target Alma as soon as she had poked her head around the corner. He'd been worried about that. On the one hand, it meant she might be able to hide from the other enemies in the dungeon. It was unlikely there were more enchanted rings of this rarity with the other monsters, though it was technically possible. On the other hand, it just reminded him that as powerful as he grew, there were always enemies with capabilities to match his own. He couldn't assume, no matter how far he advanced, that he or any of his people were ever safe. There was no safety in The Land.

He physically shook himself to ward off such morbid thoughts. Safe or not, this ring was clutch. Another twelve points to Perception was like advancing twenty skill levels, two full ranks, in Pierce the Veil, even if it was only for hidden enemies and not traps or concealed stashes. Richter looked at

his other rings.

Ring of Hidden Dangers	Durability: 15/15 Item Class: Uncommon Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +16% to trap detection
Ring of Flowing Thought	Durability: 25/25 Item Class: Rare Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +20% mana regeneration
Ring of Spell Storage	Durability: 10/10 Item Class: Uncommon Item Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.01 kg Traits: Holds one spell that can be cast upon activating the ring. This Ring can hold one Novice Level Spell. Spell will only last one day before degrading. Spell

	equipped: <i>None</i>
Minor Ring of Healing	Durability: 8/8 Item Class: Uncommon Item Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Will heal 34 Health on Wearer. Can be used twice per day
Ring of Health	Durability: 16/16 Item Class: Uncommon Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +43 Health
Ring of Enchantment Resistance	Durability: 10/10 Item Class: Scarce Quality: Exquisite Weight: 0.01 kg Traits: +32% Resistance to enchantment-type spells
Ring of Health	Durability: 21/23

	Item Class: Unusual Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +72 Health
Summoner's Ring	Durability: 22/116 Item Class: Rare Item Quality: Masterwork Weight: 0.01 kg Traits: Increase level of summoned creatures by +5

Richter considered which ring to replace. The *rare* and *scarce* rings were out of the question. In this dungeon, his Ring of Hidden Dangers was also a must. He chided himself for not loading his Ring of Spell Storage earlier, but he certainly intended to now. Focusing his will, golden light surrounded his hand and the clear gem on the ring took on the same color. *Minor Slow Heal* was locked and loaded. Richter was pretty sure he'd need it again before they cleared the dungeon.

It came down to his weaker Ring of Health and his Ring of Healing. The Ring of Healing was one of the first items he'd gotten when coming to

The Land. Despite that, and despite the fact that it only restored thirty-four health, the instantaneous nature of the healing had made him hold onto it. He weighed his options, but decided to stick with the Ring of Health. He'd already used one of the two charges on the healing ring, and his Ring of Spell Storage effectively served the same capacity now that he had stored *Minor Slow Heal*. Richter slipped the Glimmer Ring onto his hand.

“Hey, Tank!” Richter called out. Caulder looked up and the chaos seed tossed him the Ring of Healing. A grin popped up on the sergeant's face. He took his gauntlet off and slipped the ring on his hand. Richter earned himself a new prompt.

*Your continued generosity is appreciated by **Caulder**. You have gained +233 Relationship Points. Total Relationship Points: +5,601*

Alma was still moving along inside the dungeon. She had backtracked her way to the same corridor where she'd been attacked. After being abundantly careful peeking around the corner, she saw that the hallway dead-ended soon after. To Richter's delight there was a chest present. An honest-to-god wooden chest banded with metal, sitting on a large stone block. The chaos seed's adventuring heart started beating stronger in his chest. While many things made him happy, he could admit that treasure was near the top of the list. He dealt with life and death every day, but the gamer in him was still alive and well. Loot was awesome! Still, there was time for

that later. Now he had to prepare for the next battle.

Richter took out one of his dart traps and prepared to use the new rank bonus from his Traps skill for the first time. Focusing on his *Weak Fireball* spell he tried to attach it to the dart trap. Nothing happened. He wasn't daunted. New skills and capabilities usually required some experimentation. Richter tried several different approaches with no success, until he summoned his magic as if he was about to cast the spell. The process was the same for when he loaded his Ring of Spell Holding. He was finally rewarded with a prompt.

*The **Dart Trap** is missing at least one necessary component to add a spell to the mechanism.*

Why can't things ever just be easy, Richter bemoaned. With his new Unconventional Materials subskill, he was itching to tinker with the mechanism. Hopefully he could try and find out what component was missing, but now was definitely not the time. He put the trap back into his bag. Without the ability to add spells, none of his traps would be more than an annoyance to the high-level monsters in the dungeon. He could poison them of course, but best-case scenario, one monster might be hurt. It wouldn't do anything against another large party of bodaks. They would have to clear out the nest the old-fashioned way.

Caulder walked up with the remaining war party behind him. One biomage, two meidon archers, the sergeant and two other guards. “We are ready, my lord.” Richter nodded and moved forward, his men right behind him.

Alma was still scouting ahead. Several of the tunnels had turned out to be empty. The bodaks that had been in those locations had most likely already run out during the last attack, attracted by the sound of the undead chasing the dragonling. She had found a nest of five down one corridor though. Richter decided it was time to take the fight to the undead.

Richter looked at his fighting men and women. Taking point, he raised his mace, “For the Mist.”

Six sets of eyes looked back with intense loyalty. As one they responded, “For the Mist.”

CHAPTER 67 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



It took hours, but they were finally in front of what Richter suspected was the final room. They had no idea of the layout because it was sealed by a large stone door carved with figures. They had cleared the rest of the dungeon. There had been fourteen more pockets of undead, all bodak skeletons. Each collection had had a rime bodak as well, sometimes two. By attacking the groups one at a time, Richter's war party had been able to clear them out without too much more trouble.

Each battle began with Richter checking the room for traps while using *Stealth*. While he had found and disabled several traps in the corridors leading to the rooms the bodaks waited in, there hadn't been any traps in the rooms themselves. After making sure the coast was clear, he would send a summoned and evolved creature into the rooms the skeletons were in. Then, the meidon sprites and Richter would fire imbued arrows with maximum charge into the ensuing fight.

That opening salvo always took off a good deal of health from both the summoned creature and the skeletons, and tagged them with debuffs. In two cases the spider Richter had summoned had actually slipped his control and attacked the warband in response, but it had been put down quickly. That never seemed to happen when he used a saproling as bait. In the end, he wound up just using his Death rats. A simple order made the rats enter the rooms together and then scatter. It gave the bodaks multiple targets to chase and kept them occupied until the attack could begin.

After that opening volley, Richter would usually shoot a fireball into the room and then Alma would finish the rout by firing her *Psi Blast*. With the enemies well and truly thrown off, the melee fighters would charge into the room, targeting the rime bodaks first. The warband had to recover after each battle, restoring health, stamina and mana, but they were able to clear the dungeon systematically. The Sun Lotus Poison along with their Life enchantments were a serious force multiplier for the warband.

By the time they had found the final grouping of monsters, every member of Richter's warband had leveled at least once. Once again, the Potions of Clarity proved their worth. Even better, the technique had let the chaos seed gather psi crystals that collectively were worth just shy of three hundred Psi Points. Alma wanted them all immediately, of course, but he kept them in reserve, having ideas of his own. Richter had also gotten his

own series of prompts.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 18 and 19 in **Enhanced Imbue Arrow**. +95% magical damage. +190% speed of mana flow.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 18 and 19 in **Archery**. +38% bonus to aim. +38% bonus to damage.*

*Congratulations! You have reached subskill levels 7 and 8 in **Focus**. Max zoom increased to 180%.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 3, 4, ... 8 in **Mace Wielding**. +24% damage when using maces or clubs. Ignore up to 4% of an enemy's armor.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skills level 13 and 14 in **Small Blades**. +28% attack speed while using small blades. +28% bonus to damage while using small blades.*

His Dual Wielding skill had also climbed quickly. Using a *normal*-sized weapon like the mace along with his short sword took more focus than just two *small*-sized weapons, but it also made his skill advance faster.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 11 and 12 in **Dual Wield**. Base accuracy penalty in primary hand reduced to -13% and in off hand by -38%. Dual attack speed increased by +12%.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 17 in **Light Armor**. +34% to*

defense of all Light Armor.

*Congratulations! You have reached subskill levels 15, 16 and 17 in **Grace in Combat**. Dodge increased by +27% while wearing all Light Armor.*

The dungeon had given him too much practice in dodging attacks. The undead were tough bastards, and they didn't go down easily. His ability to lead also advanced dramatically. Fighting sapient monsters of high levels required coordination and tactics that were just not necessary while hunting monsters in the wild.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 16 and 17 in **War Leader**. Sphere of Influence +17% larger. +17% attack and defense for all allies within your Sphere of Influence.*

*Congratulations! You have reached subskill levels 12, 13, and 14 in **Beacon**. +140 to the Fighting Spirit of war party.*

*Congratulations! You have reached subskill level 9 in **Inspiring Leadership**. +9% to chance of war party members earning Field Advancements. +9% to the power of Field Advancements of any party members under your command or the command of your subordinates.*

The battles also gave a great infusion of War Points.

Total War Points: 752

His martial skills weren't the only ones that progressed through the

day of battle.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 4, 5, 6 and 7 in **Death Magic**. New spells are now available.*

Advancing to level five in Death magic finally qualified him to learn two more of Beyan's copied spellbooks.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Laughing Skull**. Fires a chattering skull made of Death energy at a target. Damage 10-20. Chance that target will be afflicted with *Fear* debuff. This is a spell of Death Magic, level 5. Cost: 39 mana. Duration: Instant. Range: 50 feet. Cast Time: 2 seconds. Cooldown: 2 minutes.

The new attack spell was great, but the real coup was the other magic.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Summon Weak Zombie**. Summons a Death Spirit to inhabit the remains of a recently deceased creature. The summoned creature's level will be 3 +10% of the target's total experience. Max level of 10. No abilities or skills will be carried through to this new summoned creature, but inherent racial abilities may still be maintained. This is a spell of Death Magic, level 5. Cost: 63 mana. Duration: 1 hour. Range: Touch. Cast Time: 4 seconds. Cooldown: 10

minutes.

The zombie spell had some serious drawbacks. The fact that you had to actually touch the creature, and limitations in regard to level, skills and abilities, seriously curtailed the power of the summoned Death creatures. There were great perks as well, however.

The fact that each zombie lasted a full hour made it far superior to the five-minute summoning times of most of his other creatures. When he used the spell for the first time, he didn't feel any strain on his control of it. Richter had been worried that the "zombie" spell might not work on skeletons. His definition of zombies involved decaying flesh and a penchant for brains. Apparently, that was not the case.

To his supreme satisfaction, he found that the spell could target the deanimated bones of the skeletons. After they were reanimated, *Akaton Evolution* let him evolve the creatures. It also lengthened the amount of time the Death spirits could stay on his plane by +50%. What that translated to was Richter commanding an army of nine skeletons, levels seven to ten, standing behind him. Even with that number and the evolutions, Richter didn't feel like he was in any danger of losing control of them. It was his first evidence of just how dangerous necromancers could be fielding an army

of undead.

Not only had Richter increased the number of fighters in the group, but he had also learned that his earlier theory about the relationship between bodaks and rime bodaks was correct. It appeared that the bodaks had four evolutions. One was the rime variation they had already encountered multiple times, and they also evolved into cinder, flash and crag bodaks, which were associated with water, fire, air and earth respectively. They lacked any abilities or spells, but each had a natural resistance to their element and their attacks gave extra damage of that type. The one rime skeleton the warband had been able to destroy without shattering it completely had evolved into a frost bodak. Its bones actually radiated cold and were an intense blue in color. It had small ice shards studding its body and enemies struck were afflicted with *Slow*. Richter loved his Chaotic spell and the love was given right back to him when the skill advanced!

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 2, 3, and 4 in **Chaos Magic**. New spells are now available.*

That skill progressed faster than almost any other he'd gained, but it didn't surprise him. Richter still had a feeling of intense "rightness" when he used the roiling grey magic. His other magics had advanced as well, especially Light magic. Fighting underground offered unique challenges, among them the lack of visibility. Without light, his entire party might as

well have been blind. Torches were an option, but it was necessary to hold them, decreasing the effectiveness of his fighting team. Richter came up with a partial solution after the second battle. He took the time to summon two mist lights for each member of the warband. Then he affixed one of the glowing grey balls to the front and back of each of his men. It solved the problem of not running into walls, but the lights only banished the dark for up to five feet from each man or woman. Richter still had to cast *Far Light* again and again to ensure no skeletons rushed at them from darkened corners or the shrouded ends of the corridors they moved through. Coupled with his frequent casting of *Mirror Image*, he finally reached the *initiate* rank of his skill Light Magic.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 13 in **Fire Magic**. New spells are now available.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 8, 9, 10, and 11 in **Light Magic**. New spells are now available.*

*Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in: **Light Magic**. +5% Resistance to Light Magic. +5% Spell Strength when casting Light Magic.*

*You have received 2,500 (base 2,000 x 1.25) bonus experience for reaching level 10 in the skill: **Light Magic**.*

Life Magic leveled heavily as well, of course. Richter had pulled out all the stops with his Life magic during the battles. He had attempted to use *Weak Banish Undead* and *Weak Charm*. Both of those spells had done exactly dick against the high level undead. His Life buffs were much more effective and *Weak Life Bolt* had caused some pain. Time and again Richter cast *Weak Static Life Shield*, giving himself or his warband precious seconds of respite in the heat of battle. The one hundred hit points it could absorb never lasted long, but the extra defense it gave against Death creatures and their attacks increased its usefulness by a factor of three.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 12, 13, ... 16 in **Life Magic**. New spells are now available.*

His penchant to dual cast drained his mana at a prodigious rate, and he found himself pulling on Alma's mana pool more and more. Richter had been operating with an almost constant headache for most of the dungeon dive, but it had paid off as well.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 13 and 14 in **Dual Casting**. Chance of spell miscast decreased by increasing this skill. This number is affected directly by spell level and caster's proficiency in that branch of magic. Specific changes:*

	Level Changes	Current Values

Spell Power	Increases +4% from base +100%	+156%
Mana Cost	Decreases by 2% from base +300%	+272%

The constant sneaking required also let him level his Stealth and Trap skills.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 15 and 16 in **Stealth**. You now inflict 32% greater damage during stealthed attacks. +32% to Concealment.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 26 in **Pierce the Veil**. +52% to perception.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 26 in **Traps**. All traps +52% more effective. +8% less likely to be found.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 22, 23, and 24 in **Trap Disarm**. +48% more likely to disarm traps.*

He was becoming a regular rogue. Best of all, the dungeon had been an insane boost to his experience. Between the XP gained from ranking up his skills, Alma's *Brain Drain* and the high-level enemies, he had finally gotten a long-awaited prompt.

*Congratulations! You have repaid the debt owed to your Specialty: **Essence Enchanting**. Long and bloody was the road you have walked to fulfill your obligation. Honor your Specialty and Profession to advance. Because of your diligence and devotion, you will be rewarded!*

Paying back his XP deficit triggered even more prompts.

Congratulations! You have finished a Secret Quest of the Essence Enchanter, **Debts Must be Paid III**, by repaying 1,000,000 points of experience

Reward: 30 Talent Points.

Reward: 12,500 (base 10,000 x 1.25) Experience Points.

*You have: **36 Talent Points** remaining*

Congratulations! You have unlocked a Secret Quest of the Essence Specialty: **Debts Must be Paid IV**

Success Conditions: Expend and earn back 10,000,000 experience points by using Talent Point Conversion. Total XP repaid 1,064,000/10,000,000.

Reward: 40 Talent Points

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: Cannot be refused.

Richter had been so caught up in administering and building his village that he had forgotten the pure joy of a well-executed dungeon dive. He'd forgotten the amazing allure of treasure. After looking at his haul, he wouldn't be making that mistake again!

<p>You have captured:</p> <p>Soul of a Rime Bodak x8</p>	<p>Durability: 25/25</p> <p>Item Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Stone Level: Luminous</p> <p>Soul Level: Luminous</p> <p>Status: Filled</p> <p>Weight: 0.4 kg</p>
<p>You have captured:</p> <p>Soul of a Bodak x 49</p>	<p>Durability: 20/20</p> <p>Item Class: Common</p> <p>Stone Level: Common</p> <p>Soul Level: Common</p> <p>Status: Filled</p> <p>Weight: 0.3 kg</p>



<p>You have found:</p> <p>Ring of Fire Resistance</p>	<p>Durability: 12/18</p> <p>Item Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Quality: Above Average</p> <p>Weight: 0.1 kg</p> <p>Traits: +2% to Fire Resistance</p>
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Wand of Healing</p>	<p>Attack: 1-3</p> <p>Durability: 36/47</p> <p>Item Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Quality: Well Crafted</p> <p>Weight: 0.8 kg</p> <p>Traits: Allows user to restore 27 points of Health to any creature within 10 yards</p> <p>Charges: 110/110</p>
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Ring of Avoid Missile</p>	<p>Durability: 11/15</p> <p>Item Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Quality: Above Average</p> <p>Weight: 0.1 kg</p> <p>Traits: +3% to dodge projectiles</p>
<p>You have found:</p>	<p>Durability: 22/28</p>

Ring of Ghoul Touch	Item Class: Unusual Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Allows the user to make a touch attack equivalent to the spell <i>Minor Ghoul Touch</i> doing 21-27 Death damage and paralyzing the target for up to 5 seconds Charges: 70/70
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None of the items were good enough for Richter to equip, but they made fine additions to the gear of his war party. Each gift gave him a few hundred relationship points with the party member receiving it. They found several stashes of coins totaling up to fifty-four gold and five silver, which equated to over five thousand dollars back on Earth. Richter also found a small opal and a sapphire. One room they cleared actually had three rime bodaks. Richter found a secret compartment in that room thanks to his Pierce the Veil skill, and it had the greatest haul of the entire dive so far.

You have found:	Durability: 3/9 Schematic Class: Unusual
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High	Schematic Level: Superior
Tensile	Weight: 0.4 kg
Wristshot	Traits: This weapons Schematic allows you to create a
Schematic	wristshot. Wristshots are primarily kindir weapons that allow for greater base damage (+1), faster firing (+10%) and greater accuracy (+10%) than a standard slingshot. The high tensile nature of the weapon further increases its damage by (+2). It is also easily concealed. If used by a Kindir: +10% skill progression to Slings
	Base Damage: 6-8

The Schematic was a real coup! Krom had made it clear that obtaining any weapon Schematic was a priority. The fact that it was *superior* level made it even more valuable. As strong as the weapons made in the Forge were, his Smith had told him that they were actually all based on *simple* schematics. The techniques Krom used to forge blades were no different than those used in crafting most of the blades that were made daily throughout the entire River Peninsula. It was his skill in Smithing, Richter's enchantments and the high-quality materials that made the gear of the Mist Villagers several cuts above average.

If Richter could obtain higher level Schematics though, extra capabilities could be added to the base characteristics of the weapons and armor that were made. +2 to base damage might not seem like much, but it actually made a huge difference when you factored in that the weapon's final damage was determined by its base multiplied by both the weapon's quality and the skill of the smith forging it. An initial increase of two could easily translate into a boost of four or five damage per hit.

So that Richter knew at least what to look for, Krom had told him that schematics were qualified by level. The lowest level was a *simple* schematic. After that it went *advanced, superior, innovative, groundbreaking, ingenious, cutting edge, state of the art, revolutionary, masterwork* and *savant*. The wristshot was level three!

Reading the Schematic description carefully had made it clear that the benefits of such documents were not limited to just extra damage; accuracy and rate of fire were increased as well. Krom had also told him that certain Schematic levels could only be understood by smiths or crafters of a certain level. Then he'd started talking about how Schematics required multiple people of varying skills to create the weapons, but Richter's eyes had glassed over at that point. Besides, what mattered was that he'd found some awesome treasure!

The Schematic was also a clue for what had become a bit of a

mystery. Here and there in the dungeon, they had found friezes and sculptures. The artwork had been severely degraded by time, but enough could be made out that Richter was pretty sure he was seeing depictions of kindir. A weapon that was tailored to their race had furthered his theory that they were in an ancient kindir settlement of some type. It was the door they were now standing in front of though that had dispelled any remaining doubt. Maybe because of the density of the stone or maybe because it was enspelled, but the carvings on the door looked as sharp as if they had been finished yesterday.

There were scenes of kindir laughing, playing, engaging in ceremonies and other normal daily acts. In the center was a scene of many kindir kneeling in front of an older kindir sitting atop a throne. The happy scenes seemed completely incongruent with the dark and foreboding feel of the dungeon. Unfortunately, as interesting as they were, the carvings didn't offer any insight into what awaited the warband on the other side of the door.

Richter shook his head, focusing back upon the now. They didn't have time to puzzle out the mysteries of ancient art. As this was the only door left to explore in the dungeon, it was a pretty safe bet that there was a big baddie waiting for him and his party on the other side. Every second they waited made them potentially weaker because his oldest zombie would be banished from their plane in under ten minutes. He gave an order for

everyone to get ready and buff themselves as much as possible.

While they did, the chaos seed dealt with his final prompt. It was one he'd been waiting an age to see.

*Congratulations! Your familiar has reached levels **39** and **40**!*

Eager, to say the least, Richter accessed his familiar's status window. A broad grin crossed his face despite their dire surroundings. With the boost Alma had gotten from the Quickening fruit, she finally had enough Ability Points to increase Psi Bond to level seven.

His heart beating faster, Richter called Alma down into his arms.

Are you ready to evolve your ability, my love? he asked her excitedly.

I trust you, today and always, master. Her response was full of warmth and unconditional love. Smiling at her, he accessed her abilities and made his choice. A segmented prompt opened in front of him showing the upgrades to her existing capabilities.

You have chosen to increase your familiar's ability **Psi Bond to Level 7**

Your familiar's base Intellect is increased from **125%** to **150%**

The boost to your familiar's base Intelligence and Wisdom has increased from **75%** to **90%**.

Your Mental resistance from Psi Bond has increased from **50%** to **60%**.

Your familiar can now verbally communicate in **short sentences** and psychically transmit **images** rather than merely communicating with **single words**, even with creatures lacking the Psi Bond ability.

Maximum distance of communication increased from **1500** to **1750** yards.

Tasks that once required great mental discipline are now laughably easy.
Massively reduced risk of spell miscast.

Factoring in your familiar's Psi Bond level 7 and personal level of 40, add **28%** to the chances of **Mind Fog**, **Stun** or **Psi Crystallization** occurring when using **Enhanced Imbue Arrow**

Psi Bond has now advanced to the point that your mental connections with other creatures will enhance their intellect to a **moderate** degree.

You may now engage in **Psychic Combat** with other creatures

You may now undergo the **Messeji**

Psi Bond didn't increase her attack abilities like *Brain Drain* or *Psi Blast*, but in some ways, it was her most powerful ability. It had made her smarter than most humanoids and had transformed her into a powerful magic

caster. With the latest boost to her Intelligence and Wisdom, she had a staggering ninety-eight points in both attributes. That meant both her spell power and innate spell resistance were way over baseline. The bodak's Water spell that she had shaken off before might only be a nuisance now. His familiar was powerful!

He took a look at her stats.

Name: Alma	Level: 40, 15%	Race: Psi Dragonling
STATS		
Health: 137	Mana: 978 <i>Regen/min: 58.65</i>	Stamina: 189 <i>Regen/min: 11.4</i>
ATTRIBUTES* *+5% Celestial Spark		
Strength: 5	Agility: 36	Dexterity: 37
Constitution: 14	Endurance: 19	Intelligence: 98
Wisdom: 98	Charisma: 19	Luck: 19
SPELL POWER BONUSES		
Air 50%	Life 50%	
RESISTANCES		
Air 50%	Mental 100%	Life 50%
ABILITIES (Unused Points: 1.95)		
Psi Bond – Lvl 7, points to next level: 6 Psi Blast – Lvl 3, points to next level: 3 Brain Drain – Lvl 7, points to next level: 7 Psi Channeling – Lvl 2, points to next level: 2		

Richter also personally enjoyed seeing the change in her eyes, the primary reason he'd had her land in his arms. She gazed at him with greater comprehension than ever before. When he had first summoned her, she had basically just been a smart beast. The dragonling's cognition had increased with every level of Psi Bond. She had gone from sounding like an animal to having the voice of a small child, then a young woman. Now when she spoke, there was an eloquence and confidence to her tone that he likened to the most self-assured and powerful women he'd met.

As excited as he was about her new stats, he was completely confused as to what psychic combat and the Messeji were. Before he could ask about either though, she looked deep into his eyes and spoke with pure love in her voice.

My lord. My master. My love. I shall be with you until our souls bind in the Great Unity at the end of all things. Let our enemies bless us for the days we allow them to live until we snuff the decaying candles of their lives. She leaned forward and stared him in the face, **Bond with me master. Let us truly be one.** Then, shocking him to his very core, she spoke aloud in a sibilant but still feminine voice, "Bond with me."

Staring at her, his own eyes now wide, he read a final prompt that appeared in his vision. All the effects on the initial prompt had been expected. They were great and they had made her a vastly more powerful

creature. As he had hoped though, just as when *Brain Drain* had reached level seven, Psi Bond now had a powerful and completely new feature.

*Know This! Advancing the Psi Bond of your soul familiar to level 7 has allowed for a connection deeper than ever before. You may now undergo the **Messeji**, the melding. This process allows you to absorb the entire essence of your familiar so that you may share each other's strengths and defenses. The bonding can last for a maximum of seven minutes each day, and when completed, it will take 77 seconds for your familiar to coalesce back into her physical form. During that time, she will be a formless psychic energy immune to physical damage but able to pass through solid matter.*

*By undergoing the **Messeji**, your familiar will be safe within your body. Any debuffs, injuries, ill effects or negative status will be removed. When separated from you again, her health, mana, stamina, and all statuses will return to the exact point they were before the bonding. All abilities will be reset.*

*By undergoing the **Messeji**, all attributes, resistances and regen rates will be the highest value of either you or your familiar. Your physical attributes will temporarily change to adopt characteristics of your familiar. Whatever enhancements you have bought with Psi Points will tell in your Messeji form. More alterations may occur and be discovered over time.*

Alma was still staring him deeply in the face. One last prompt awaited him.

*Do you wish to undergo the **Messeji** with your soul familiar, Alma? Yes or No?*

Looking into her bright and intelligent eyes, Richter chose “Yes.”

A beam of blue-white light the incandescent color of Thought magic shot from Alma’s eyes into his own. It flowed into his mind and his very being. More light began to shine through her scales as they lost cohesion and she became a creature of pure light. The flow increased to become nearly blinding bars of glacial energy. Her thoughts, her feelings, her very soul poured into Richter and he felt a connection to her that went beyond words, beyond comprehension. They simply were. Her body became nothing but a matrix of Thought energy as the melding continued.

Richter’s body glowed as well. Strange sensations overtook him. A feeling of fullness and solidity. He tried to blink but had no control over his body. There was no panic, however, as the Messeji felt like the most natural thing in world. Like welcoming a loved one into your home. It wasn’t an invasion, it was a completion. He was a stronger version of what he had been. He was finally what he always should have been. Richter began to feel heavier and his tongue felt strange.

Though he couldn't move, he was still aware. Another prompt appeared in his vision accompanied by a deep thrumming sound. He absorbed the information with a thought.

THOOMMM!

*Know This! The deep bond of the Messeji has advanced your Mark, **Dragonkin**, to Level 2. This deepens the instinctual response of some races to you, for good or ill. The full ramifications of this may never be known, but the following changes take place immediately: The +5 to Strength, Constitution, Fire Resistance and Fire Spell Strength are now increased to +10. These changes will remain in effect after the Messeji ends. While in Messeji form, you now have access to a new attack, **Glass Flame**. Once per bonding, you may make a powerful breath attack, bathing a cone-shaped area in clear flames of terrifying heat! Be wary, this attack kills friend and foe alike, and does 5 times as much damage in terms of Durability loss to items.*

His status window popped up unbidden, showing the powerful fusion of himself and Alma. Without being told, he knew that the numbers in parentheses were where her values had supplanted his own.

Name: Richter	Age: 24	Level: 35, 33%
Race: Chaos Seed (Messeji Dragon)	Profession: Enchanter	Languages: Sapient Mortals

Reputation: Lvl 5 “You are a man worth following.”	Specialty: Essence	Alignment: Chaotic (2) Neutral
STATS		
Health: 773	Mana: 770 (978) <i>Regen/min:</i> 32.4 (58.59)	Stamina: 350 <i>Regen/min:</i> 33.6
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 38 <i>(base: 30 + items: 8)</i>	Agility: 32 (36)	Dexterity: 38 <i>(base: 23 + items: 15)</i>
Constitution: 62 <i>(base: 61 + mark: 1%)</i>	Endurance: 35	Intelligence: 73 (98) <i>(base: 66 + Quickening: 10%)</i>
Wisdom: 45 (98)	Charisma: 36 <i>(base: 30 + Honorable: 4 + Impassioned: 5%)</i>	Luck: 25
SPELL POWER BONUSES		
Air 50%	Light 5%	Fire 5%
Life 50%	Blood 5%	Earth 5%
RESISTANCES		
Air 50%	Earth 25%	Fire 15%
Life 50%	Mental 65% (100%)	Spiritual 5%
Light 5%	Blood 5%	
ABILITIES		
Limitless: 100% affinity in any and every skill Gift of Tongues: Ability to comprehend almost any sapient language Fast Learner: +30% to speed of skill advancement Bounty of Life: +30% growth for the physical manifestation of your Place of Power Psi Bond, Level 7:		

+60% Mental Resistance

Maximum Communication Distance 1750 yards

Eye contact offers the chance to connect with other creatures in a limited way

Psi Blast, Level 3*: Can fire a beam of concentrated psychic energy causing health damage, Stun and Disorientation. Can fire 3 beams every 5 minutes.

Brain Drain, Level 7*: Can absorb the mental energy of a creature, draining them of health, mana and stamina. Can Stun creatures up to level 31. At death will absorb 7% of the creature's total experience. Chance to absorb a poignant memory from the creature upon death.

Glass Flame*: Can breathe colorless fire over anything within twenty yards. 50-100 Damage over 7 seconds.

x5 Damage to durability of items.

Feel of Chaos: Detect sources of Chaos within 200 yards

* while in Messeji form...

The largest differences were the bumps to his Intelligence and Wisdom. Both his spell power, resistance, mana pool and mana regen were increased massively. Even his Agility got a small increase. His Mental resistance had also maxed out at 100%. Even more significant, he had gained Alma's abilities, with the exception of Psi Channeling, which would, of course, require her to be separate from him.

The internal changes were powerful, but the external changes were more dramatic. His face had elongated, giving him a short snout. He could feel sharp teeth with his prehensile, forked tongue. His skin had been replaced by scales, the same dusky color and diamond shape as Alma's own.

The fingers of his hands had elongated and were now tipped with thick, sharp talons. He absently realized that there might be a problem if he ever wore heavier gauntlets. The sprite gauntlets left his fingers free, providing less protection but allowing them to fire their bows unencumbered. He also felt a faint itching across his shoulder blades but it subsided in a moment.

More prompts appeared listing the changes to his physical body, reflecting Alma's enhancements from the psi crystals.

Know This! The following physical changes have taken place due to the Messeji

- 1) *Your Natural Armor increased from 0 to +5*
- 2) *Your bites and scratches now exude Psi Poison*
- 3) *Your skin color can shift by up to 5% to match your surroundings*
- 4) *You may manifest Darkvision up to 100 yards*

There was one more notification that appeared after he had absorbed everything else.

Hail, the Dragon! May they fear your power. Be warned though, mighty creature. Death of one is death of all.

The last prompt was strange. It wasn't in a self-contained box like every other prompt he'd ever had. It was just writing that was emblazoned

across his vision. It even looked hand-scrawled rather than the uniform block lettering common to almost every prompt he'd ever received. The message felt... personal. It faded away in a moment on its own, not even needing to be dismissed. Richter wondered at it for a brief moment, but he was too taken with the wonder of what had happened to give it any more time than that.

He and Alma had melded. Richter could feel her inside of him. She was aware of what was occurring, but they didn't vie for control. Their desires were his desires... or hers were his... theirs? The chaos seed couldn't quite understand it, but he learned a valuable truth in that moment. Sometimes, questions did not matter. All that mattered was the truth. The truth of that moment was that he and Alma were one.

The entire process had seemed to take several seconds, but to everyone else it had happened instantaneously. His men only saw a flash of light, and then their war leader had become a human-dragon hybrid.

"Banished gods!" Caulder almost shouted before catching himself. It came out as a constipated whisper instead. Everyone else's reactions were the same. Barring the summoned creatures, they all pulled away from the being that had appeared in front of them.

"Lord Richter?" Caulder asked. "Is that you?"

“You know anyone else this sexy?” came the sibilant reply. Then Richter focused on casting, his hands weaving quickly through the motions of summoning spells. After increasing their Psi Bond to level seven, the faint resistance he had felt from controlling the Death creatures had faded to almost nothing. After melding with her, it had vanished completely. Her mental control was astonishing.

He decided to maximize their chances. After downing three mana potions at once, he summoned and evolved creatures in quick succession. The saproling became a hardwood saproling. His spider evolved into a cinderspore arachnid, capable of a fire attack. The Life wisp became a “harsh light.” It lost all healing abilities but could phase through the bodies of enemies, causing Life damage. The fox evolved into a shining fox again, with its minor health regen boost. Richter even summoned the bile rats, which evolved into steel-toothed rodents that possessed a powerful bite and were increased in size by 50%.

Between his amped mana regen and the potions, he was restoring almost twenty MP per second, at least for the minute that the potions lasted. The blue bar on his interface was almost full again by the time he finished casting. The hallway in front of the stone door had become crowded, but seeing the dragon creature using their lord’s spells had set the men’s minds at relative ease. It also sunk in that he was wearing the same armor. As a final

preparation, Richter drank one of his three remaining Potions of Selak's Luck, increasing the stat by thirty-four points.

“Let's go,” Richter finally commanded with a faint hiss, pushing the huge stone door open as easily as if it were made of mere wood.

CHAPTER 68 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



As the stone slab slowly swung open, a large chamber was revealed. A green orb of light hung suspended from the ceiling. The stones that comprised the walls, floor and ceiling were much better tooled than the rough-fitting blocks of the rest of the dungeon. The reason was made clear when Richter saw the dais at the end of the immense area. They were in a throne room.

The room rose in a series of tiers. On the ground floor along with the war party were ten bodaks. They all wore well-cared-for gear, and by using *Analyze* Richter was able to confirm his suspicion that each was a Professional Warrior. Three had bows and the rest a mix of melee weapons and shields. A small wooden cage off to the left contained the cowering forms of two kindir. Their clothes were bloody and torn. Both were curled into balls, making themselves as small as possible in the vain hope that the undead might forget they were there.

On the first tier there were five rime bodaks all wearing the robes of magi. On the third and final tier there were three figures. To the left and right there were frost bodaks holding greatswords and clad in high steel armor. In the middle, a truly horrid creature of rotting flesh and weeping sores sat atop a throne.

The throne was made of slightly reflective black stone. The bodies of three kindir lay broken and bloody at the foot of the dais. All the undead were motionless. The one exception was the figure sitting on the throne. It held the severed head of one of the slain kindir in its lap. The undead's long fingers were, almost lovingly, running through the murdered kindir's long red hair.

Richter and the boss locked eyes, and the chaos seed used *Analyze*.

Name: Nien the Reaver	Profession: Warrior	Disposition: Hatred
Level: 48	Specialty: Death Knight	Race: Ghast
	Focus: Soul Eater	
STATS		
Health: 592	Mana: 283	Stamina: 290
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 92	Agility: 22	Dexterity: 93
Constitution: 46	Endurance: 29	Intelligence: 25
Wisdom: 14	Charisma: 4	Luck: 11
SKILLS		

Swordsmanship: 62	Shields: 54	Death Magic: 17
Maces: 52	Heavy Armor: 68	Dark Magic: 12
Torture: 37	Instill Fear: 29	Death Aura: 35
Unarmed Combat: 28	War Leader: 38	Death Strike: 51

DESCRIPTION

Ghasts are born from the union of demons and undead. When newly spawned these creatures are little more than animals but, unlike their ghoul cousins, upon reaching higher levels their intellect can match any sapient creature's. They are blood drinkers, though they can exist on fetid flesh long gone rotten. Their paralyzing touch allows them to eat their prey while it still lives. Ghasts are said to get an almost sexual pleasure from the pain of their victims. Immune to poisons and most spells of the enchantment class, they are dangerous foes. They will fight if only one point of health remains, deadly to the very end. Once sapience is achieved, ghasts receive one point to distribute per level, and each level gives +2 to Strength and +2 to Dexterity.

The information washed over Richter in a split second. At a subconscious level he felt an instinctual fear, like a fox facing a wolf. Both he and the ghast were predators, but the Death Knight was older and, based on the listed skills, far stronger. Richter wasn't intimidated though. The fear only made him more dangerous. Unbeknownst to himself, Richter's lips pulled back in a snarl, showing his now-sharp teeth. Something deep inside the chaos seed was proclaiming that even if the creature was stronger, the ghast would sure as shit regret testing him.

The more analytical part of Richter's mind considered what the

monster's status page meant for the battle to come. The ghast was an *initiate* in both Death and Dark magic, but that was not the true danger. The creature was a melee fighter, no matter what magical skills he possessed. The knight's Strength was almost a hundred, as was his Dexterity. That meant not only would the knight's attacks inflict devastating damage, but he would also have an insanely high attack speed.

To make things worse, Richter's *Identify Enchantment* Talent was also triggered. The ghast was decked out in powerfully enchanted gear, adding health, mana and stamina. His equipment also increased his damage and defenses. The Death Knight would not go down easily, but then, that would be boring anyway.

"Target the archers and casters," Richter commanded with a slight hiss. He was raising his weapons when the most unlikely thing occurred. The ghast laughed.

The sound was horrible. A moment later the monster spoke in Common, and though his speech was elegant, it sounded as if the words were being filtered through a bubbling sludge. The disgusting consonants sent an involuntary shiver through everyone in the warband, "Welcome. Welcome! Did you have fun with my creatures?"

The entire warband just looked at the ghast as he casually stood. His

fingers were still entwined in the slain woman's long red hair, and the head slowly swung back and forth. Richter couldn't help but look at that slack face. Her mouth was open in an eternally silent scream, with one eye rolled partially back into her head. The archers looked askance at Richter. The chaos seed had no idea what was going on, but figured it was worth one minute to find out. The forces arrayed against them were massive. In a straight battle, it was highly likely he would take heavy losses even without the boss fighting. Of course, it wouldn't go down like that. The ghast would start dealing death as soon as the battle began. Richter's whole warband might be wiped out. If there was another way out of this, it might be worth a shot.

Richter spoke under his breath to Caulder, "If they rush us, retreat out of the dungeon. I will hold them off to cover you. That's an order!" He put heat into his last sentence to head off any argument. The sergeant nodded, his face grim.

The chaos seed turned a cold stare on the ghast. Alma spoke inside of his mind, wanting to split the undead open from balls to bowtie. Nien just looked back with a malicious smile on his face. It was obvious that the undead had seen Richter's quiet discussion with Caulder, and still wasn't worried. Seeing the forces at the ghast's command, Richter could understand why.

As Nien continued to speak, he walked towards the front of the raised dais, “I was planning on wiping out that kindir village later tonight and adding their strength to my own, but you look like you would be a better addition.” He stared at Richter with intense focus before adding, “I can always use an Enchanter.”

Richter’s lips pulled back in another snarl. This guy knew his Profession! That meant the ghast had his own version of Richter’s *Analyze* skill. As if the high stats and level weren’t enough, the ghast could read at least part of his status page. Did he know all his spells and abilities too?

“Why are you here?” Richter asked, trying not to let his unease show. He was also trying to ignore the nearly twenty high level bodaks aiming arrows, raising wands or hefting weapons in their direction while staring right at them with their eerily empty eye sockets.

“I was sent,” Nien replied simply. “My master detected a disturbance in this area.” He seemed amused, like a cat talking to a mouse before dinner.

“But why did you invade this dungeon? Why did you bring this army of undead to my lands?” Richter asked. The monster regarded him with much more interest all of a sudden. Nien studied the chaos seed’s face in detail, until the ghast smiled in sick satisfaction. Richter didn’t understand exactly what had just happened, but still cursed when he realized he was

giving away more information than he was gaining.

“This?” the creature asked with his incredulous and disgusting laugh. “An army? You poor fool. These creatures are merely the interred dead I found in this place. There was so much stored up Death energy that the spirits were almost begging for a real master. They are most likely the ancestors of the same kindir that I will be eating tonight.” He favored Richter with a broad smile. His yellow and brown teeth were grotesque when set against his rotting face.

“You desecrated their burial ground?” Kentyiro shouted in outrage.

Richter looked at the meidon sprite sharply. The archer’s expression was defiant, but after a moment, he nodded to Richter in apology for interjecting. His eyes remained fierce. As a race, sprites found what they considered to be perversions of nature and life to be sacrilege.

“I did, little sprite,” the ghast responded with a leer. “and I will do worse to your people, very soon. Not only will the decaying flesh of your corpses serve me, but I will bind your spirits to increase my power. You will see, personally, when I rip your souls from your bodies, unless,” he looked lasciviously at Richter, “your leader agrees to my terms.”

“You cannot trust this thing!” Caulder spat.

“That is true,” he agreed with another horrid laugh, “but your options

are more limited than you know.” With a wave of his hand the stone door slammed shut. That resounding thud started a drumbeat of panic in the hearts of every member of the warband. “Now,” Nien enunciated slowly while stepping down to the second tier of the dais, “shall we begin?”

CHAPTER 69 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



Caulder immediately ran over to the door and attempted to pry it open, but the lack of concern on the Death Knight's face bode ill for the sergeant's chances. Nien stared at Richter, completely ignoring Caulder's efforts. A moment later, he continued, "As I was saying, your pathetic group of fighters can battle me and my 'army'," Nien's voice turned mocking with the last word, "of bodak slaves, but you will die.

"I do not care about this, of course. In time, my master will convert every living thing in this forest into a desiccated husk. Not even insects will survive the apocalypse!" Nien's voice became exultant as he spoke, reveling in the utopia he was envisioning. "Only glorious death and beautiful corruption will remain above and everything you hold dear will wither!"

The Death Knight had started to look off to the side, picturing this horrific future, but then his gaze snapped back to Richter's face with a sneer, "All of this will happen no matter what occurs in this throne room today,

but!” The ghast stopped talking and raised one gauntleted finger.

His final word hung in the air between the two forces, worming into the hearts of the warband. They all knew that their fates might rest on the disgusting creature’s next words. Nien smiled, almost physically feeding on their fear. “But,” he continued, “if you agree to fight me in single combat for your Place of Power, one Master to another, then no matter who wins, I will allow your party to leave this dungeon unmolested.”

The mocking tone left his voice when he spoke his next words. Richter heard and felt the Power being breathed into existence as the ghast invoked ritual words that were written into the skein of the Universe, “I, Nien of the Shadow Trench, challenge you, Richter, to a Duel to the Final Death! Let none stand between us or by us. By the Accords Eternal, let it be heard!”

A sound like a barbarian’s battle cry filled Richter’s ears at the same time that a prompt appeared.

RAAAAR!

*Richter of the Mist Village, you have been identified by another Master of a Place of Power. You have been challenged to a **Duel**. Since the creation of the The Land, creatures of Power have been able to challenge one another to take a portion or all of the other Master’s Powers. You may refuse a **Duel** with no ill effect, but if you agree to the terms, they will be enforced by The*

Land itself!

***Nien** of the **Forsaken Trench**, a level two Place of Power containing ley Lines of Water and Death, has challenged Richter of the Mist Village, a level one Place of Power containing Ley Lines of Air, Life, Dark and Water, to a **Duel**.*

Stakes	Ownership of the loser's Heart Crystal shall transfer to the victor
Code	Single Combat
Second	None
End	Final Death
Qualifiers	The members of the party of Richter of the Mist Village will be allowed to leave the dungeon unmolested regardless of the results of the Duel

Upon seeing the prompt, knowledge flooded Richter's mind. He instinctually knew much more about the simple grid than he should. The prompt was a magic as old as The Land itself, and every denizen of the magical world was linked to this ancient set of Rules.

The “Stakes” were easily explained. They were the spoils that went to the victor. The “Code” determined the overall rules of the duel. *Single Combat*, for instance, meant that the fight was between him and the Death Knight but familiars and summoned creatures could still come into play, as opposed to a *One-on-One* where such helpers were forbidden. In either case, minions or allies were not permitted. It basically meant Nien was saying Richter could use his summoned creatures, but the ghaſt’s bodaks couldn’t fight on his ſide. It was a ſlight that the Death Knight was aiming at the chaos ſeed, ſaying that even with help Nien didn’t conſider him a threat.

That barb did chap Richter’s aſs a bit. He wouldn’t complain or argue though. The chaos ſeed wasn’t intereſted in a fair fight, he never had been. He wanted to win. While Nien ſtared, waiting for Richter’s reſponse, the chaos ſeed continued to examine the prompt.

A “Second” was ſomeone who could fight on your behalf, if needed. Nien had effectively ruled that out when he ſaid, “Let none ſtand between us or by us.” The “End” was easily explained; it was what determined the termination condition of the Duel. The “End” could include *First Blood*, *Yield*, *Death* or any number of options. In this caſe, it was the *Final Death*. *Death* would not have been an exacting enough definition when fighting an undead. Finally, the “Qualifiers” covered any ſpecial proviſos that were added to the fight.

Richter was not really comfortable with the “Qualifiers” but thankfully there was another prompt waiting.

*You may accept the **Duel** as stated, refuse it completely, or change the conditions and challenge **Nien** of the **Forsaken Trench** to a Duel in turn. Be warned! Once the Mandates of a Duel have been set, no Power in the Land can alter them.*

Once Nien had made the pronouncement about the Duel, the air in the throne room had grown heavy with portent. Everyone present waited for his response. Richter’s mind was still occupied with one question though. How had Nien known he was the Master of a Place of Power? Saying that these were “his lands” shouldn’t necessarily have been enough by itself. Richter searched the ghaſt’s expectant face. The undead’s rotting features made it hard to read a nuanced expression, but the naked greed there was easy to decipher. The chaos seed was about to ask a question, but then he saw it: the glimmer in the monster’s eye. The glimmer that Hisako had warned him about so long ago, that always let two Masters identify each other.

The Death Knight smiled hideously at Richter. He could read the growing realization even on the chaos seed’s new draconian face. The silence dragged on, though Richter thought his thudding heart should have been loud enough for all to hear. What could he do? He did not want to risk his Place of Power, but...he looked at Caulder and the rest of his warband...

he couldn't let his people wage a battle they couldn't win. This was not a game. These were real people that would not come back with the push of a Reset button.

One of Richter's summoned skeletons collapsed, the magic keeping the Death spirit on this plane having elapsed. It was a strong reminder that time was passing while he dithered. His own Messeji bond with Alma had only five and a half minutes left. He had to make a decision, and it had to be made now. The undead all stood by, silent as the grave, while they awaited Richter's answer.

Could they run? Richter looked over and saw Caulder still pulling at the stone door. It hadn't budged an inch. Seeing as how Nien had closed it without moving, it was obviously magically sealed. No, he realized, they couldn't escape.

Could they fight? Yes, but the cost in lives would be horrible, even if they could win. His enchanted creatures had all been evolved, but their levels were lower than any of the enemy bodaks in the room. Richter let his gaze run over his party. Every one of them met his gaze and nodded, ready to do whatever was required. Despite the fact that each made it clear they were with him, he could see the fear on their faces. Would they be standing firm if his War Leader skill and the Morale of the village weren't buffering their Fighting Spirit? Even if they were, could he spend their lives if there

was another option?

Caulder gave up his efforts on the door. Keeping his eyes on the enemy undead, he walked over to Richter and put his hand on the chaos seed's shoulder. With calm assurance, he told his lord, "We are with you, my lord. We will stand by you until the fires of the demon realms freeze."

The man's calm strength was as reassuring to Richter as the firmness of the earth beneath his feet. It brought a bit of peace to the thudding of Richter's heart. "You will stand with me until then?" he asked with his slightly hissing voice. His lips pulled back in a pitiful attempt at a smile, made even worse by his changed reptilian face.

Caulder did not hesitate to put a broad smile on his own face. The sergeant's choice to embrace humor, even when death literally looked at them with hunger, was a greater exaltation of life than a thousand men screaming in defiance. "You misunderstand, my lord. We will fight with you until the fires freeze over, and then we shall fight on the ice." He turned towards Nien and the undead, then hefted his shield and raised his weapon, "Right, men?" His voice was the loud shout of an army sergeant.

"Raaa!" was the combined answer from the other six members of the war band. The three melee fighters set their shields together, facing the enemy, and the two archers pulled their arrows back. The biomancer held

aloft his new Wand of Healing in one hand and raised the other to cast whatever spell would be required.

“We are with you, my lord,” Caulder proclaimed, his tone now fierce. His eyes were locked upon the ghast. “I am tired of waiting. Let us kill this foul thing quickly. There is cold ale and a hot woman waiting for me in the village!”

“Much better than the other way around!” one of the guards called out. There were grim chuckles all around and the men prepared for the fight of their lives.

Richter smiled at the fierceness of his warband. Confronted with their bravery, he knew what he had to do. They had made the choice easy for him. Not for the first time, his intent was recognized by The Land itself, and the words flowed easily, as if a Power greater than himself was guiding him.

“I have three changes to the Qualifiers. One, you will let my people leave now, and promise that neither you, nor any agent you are associated with, will take aggressive action against any of my people or the kindir of the nearby settlement for at least one week. Two, you will release the kindir you captured. They will leave with my people. And three, you will give me a vital piece of information about your master, something that will help me and my people, before we fight. If you kill me, it shouldn’t matter what you say.

When I kill you, well... you're fucked anyway. If you agree to these terms, then I, Richter of the Mist Village, challenge you, Nien of the Shadow Trench, to a Duel to the Final Death! Let none stand between us or by us. By the Accords Eternal, let it be heard!"

"My lord, no!" Kentyiro shouted.

"Quiet!" Richter snapped. His stare continued to bore into the ghast.

For the first time, the undead had lost its smug expression. With Nien's saggy and decaying features, it was impossible to be sure of his emotions, but the hesitation spoke volumes. No matter how powerful the Death Knight was, he still feared his master. Something inside of Richter knew that the undead needed one more push.

The chaos seed turned away from the undead, and with as much scorn as he could muster, he spoke to Caulder, "You were right, sergeant. This coward is just an errand boy and is beneath my notice. You may kill him while I destroy the bodaks. Archers! Prepare to-"

"I accept," the ghast spat in his gargling voice, "Your men have one minute to leave the room. If they remain in the room beyond that time, their souls will feed my power!" He waved his hand and the stone door opened. Another wave made one of the bodaks open the cage that held the last two living captives. The kindir cried out in fear when the undead monster

grabbed them, but it just pulled their small bodies over to the warband and cast them on the floor. With expressions of horror and disbelief, they ran out the door, not waiting on Richter's party to escort them out.

Richter turned to his sergeant. In hissing tones, he ordered, "Leave. Every second you delay, you are eating into my buffs. Take the rest of our men and escort the wounded back to the kindir settlement. Wait for me for one hour, and if I am not back by then, get our people back to the village safely. Extend an offer of protection to the kindir as well, but if they refuse or even delay, leave. Your priority is to get our people home!"

Caulder's jaw quivered with repressed emotion, but the sergeant was a consummate soldier, "You heard him, men. Move out! On the double! And leave most of your mist lights." Richter nodded his thanks to the sergeant for remembering that he would need light in the battle to come.

Kentyiro opened his mouth, but Richter cut him off, "On the double, he said! You will follow all of Caulder's instructions until you hear otherwise from me. Now move!" The sprite bared teeth, but did as commanded, forcefully slamming his arrow back into his quiver.

You too, my love. You need to leave. Richter and Alma hadn't spoken since the Messeji began, but it wasn't because they couldn't. The two of them had simply been so in sync that words had not been necessary, but

now he knew they would disagree. As powerful as the bond made him, he couldn't risk what would happen to her if he died while they were bonded.

He remembered the warning he'd received after bonding to Alma, "Death of one is death of all." The words were etched into his mind. The only reason he had agreed to this Duel was that it required a "final death." Richter felt relatively sure that term had been used by the undead creature because it was, by definition, already dead. He was also fairly sure that it didn't know he could be reborn. That gave him a secret edge.

On the other hand, he had no idea how many lives he had left. He just knew they were finite. If he was only entitled to three... well, that would just suck a fat one. He would not only be gone, but would also be risking the lives of everyone in the village. That was why he had insisted no harm would come to his people for at least a week. If the worst were to happen, he was sure Hisako would see them to safety. That brought some peace to his troubled soul.

Despite the dangers, he just couldn't let Caulder and the rest of his men die in this shitty hole in the ground. Not if there was a chance he could end it himself. He had taken a great risk agreeing to the Duel, but sometimes, you just had to roll the hard six. Any Georgia boy worth the name was willing to take a risk and fight the good fight. One thing he didn't want to risk, however, was Alma's life.

She, of course, had other plans. Rather than speak, she sent him a memory of when she had been just a simple creature, newly summoned, and their eyes had locked for the first time. They both relived how that moment had changed them for all eternity. Their soul bond would not just last one life; it would endure until the youngest sun burned out. It took only a moment, but their communion felt like it lasted an hour. After he was reminded of how deep their bond was, her answer was a simple, **I am with you, my love.** A hint of moisture came to Richter's eyes, and he sent her a heartfelt feeling of appreciation.

The warband filed out the door with Caulder bringing up the rear. Before the man left, he looked Richter in the eye and said, "Make it hurt."

With absolute intensity, Richter returned the look, "That's what I do." Caulder slipped through the door and it slammed shut behind him. The force was hard enough to cause a fine sprinkling of dust to fall from the stone doorway. Before it had even settled to the floor, the Death Knight fulfilled his side of the bargain. Even with the undead's decaying features, it was easy to read his anger as he was forced to fulfill the terms of the Duel.

"In accordance with the Qualifier of the Duel, I give you this information. The guardian of a Dark magic portal was slain recently. The destination key on our side of the portal was lost long ago, so my master could not be sure that I would be able to return after I was sent to discover

why. In case I was killed or could not report my findings, he has laid a trap for any who come through the portal that will slay all who dare to enter our realm.”

The undead’s information confirmed that when Richter had killed the decaemur knight he had tipped off its master, the eldritch magic user. That had already been pretty evident though with the rise of undead attacks in the lands surrounding the village. The more important point was about the key.

Richter had known the activation key had to be present on the other end of the portal. Both the sending and receiving portals had to have the activation keys present, otherwise the portal’s magic wouldn’t work at all. For a portal to be more than just a pretty light show, the gate needed a second runestone, the destination key. The key took you to a specific place. Without it, you simply passed through the energy field and nothing happened. The Tefonim knowledge Richter had been given about portals hinted at something called an “untethered portal” that worked without a destination key, but his knowledge didn’t tell him exactly what that was.

The Death Knight had been true to the terms of the Duel. The information he had provided was valuable. Not knowing if the destination key was present on the other side of the portal was what had kept Richter from entering it in the past. When you added in the fact that the lich was waiting for them and had laid a trap, it meant Richter and Hisako couldn’t

risk taking their armies through the gateway. It would be a slaughter.

How would they get to the lich then? Richter couldn't just let the undead attacks continue and get worse. There had to be another way! Richter thought about the Death Knight's story and realized there was an obvious question that could be the answer to his problems.

"Then how do you plan to get back?" Richter asked.

The ghast slipped a helmet over his head, completing his set of heavy armor. "No, worm. The Qualifiers have been met." With that pronouncement, an aura of purple and black light exploded out from his body, bathing the entire room.

Richter staggered backward as red warning prompts filled his vision like alarms that came too late.

*You are afflicted with **Fear!***

*You are afflicted with **Death Aura!** Death Magic +35% more effective while within the aura. You are +7% more likely to suffer critical hits. Enemies within the Death Aura area are afflicted with Despair.*

*You are afflicted with **Despair!** Attack speed and Damage decreased by 28%.*

The Death Knight glared at Richter's quivering body through the slats in his helmet. His voice was horrifyingly quiet, "Your soul is mine."

CHAPTER 70 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



Richter had never been so afraid in his life. It was all he could do not to piss himself, and that was a near thing. He was no stranger to fear. He had been plunged into one terrifying experience after another since coming to The Land. Some were worse than others... tentacle monster... the Assassin...

His mouth went dry and his eyes widened in absolute horror. His body had started shaking, and he could do nothing to stop it. Remembering those traumatic events had just made the shivering worse. The face of the Death Knight shifted to the face of every nightmare he had ever had, the undead's aura plunging sharp claws into his soul. The chaos seed quailed under the onslaught, but then something happened, something that had saved men since time immemorial.

A woman told him he was being a moron.

Despite the debuffs, Alma's voice came through loud and clear,
**Snap out of it! Your Mental resistance is 100% now. The psychic effects of*

*the undead's aura cannot touch you. You are only suffering from the emotional component. Focus on my voice and retreat within your mental fortress!**

Though terror clenched his heart, the deep bond between he and Alma still let her words reach him. Her love and dedication were all the proof he needed to believe her words and firm his will. The Death Knight started stalking forward, arrogant words falling from his lips as he taunted Richter.

The undead thought Richter was completely paralyzed and helpless, as so many of his enemies had been in the past. An angry voice deep inside of the chaos seed started spitting in defiance. That voice vowed that the undead creature would regret his hubris.

**Fight, master! You can use my strength, but you must focus!*
*Fight!**

Richter followed her advice and ignored the Death Knight's taunts. Instead, he pulled his awareness inward. Doing so made him completely helpless, but that was already the case. Once he knew what to do, it was the work of a moment to conjure the mental representation of his village. Just as before, it had a small fort in the middle that was his primary mental bulwark. There were differences though. The village walls were twice as high as they normally were, and the small fort that represented his primary defenses had

turned into a two-story castle.

Richter pictured himself at the top of a battlement looking out over the village and out past the settlement walls. He felt something coming and, within moments, a creeping red fog appeared. It was actually thicker than mere fog, he realized. It oozed more than flowed. The scarlet mist appeared in one spot in the distance, then two, then a dozen. Before long, the viscous red fog was flowing in from the forest in all directions.

“It is the ghaſt’s *Fear* ſkill trying to overcome your mental defenses,” came a familiar reptilian voice from above. Richter knew it well, but it was ſtill ſtrange hearing Alma with his ears rather than inside his head.

The chaos ſeed looked up. Reſting on the roof was Alma. But ſhe was big! The ſmall familiar now had a body the height of a Great Dane and twice the length. She unfurled her wings when ſhe ſaw him looking at her. Each of the inky black appendages ſtretched five feet. Her voice held a tone of ſmug ſatisfaction, “Am I not beautiful, maſter?”

Deſpite the impending attack, her cockineſs ſtill amused him. Richter reaſoned that with the time dilation effect within the walls of his mind, they had a ſecond to talk. “You are gorgeous, you ſilly thing,” he reſponded with a ſmile. “And you’re ſpeaking ſo well.”

“As this is all inside your mind, maſter, technically I’m not,” ſhe

responded sardonically. **I can still speak to you psychically,** “but I found that I enjoyed speaking with you before we underwent the Messeji.” The familiar switched between the two modes of conversation seamlessly, and in each, her voice was the same.

A woman liked the sound of her own voice. Shocking, he thought to himself... or at least he thought it had been to himself. The fact that she hissed at him seemed to indicate otherwise. Apparently the Messeji also lowered the barrier between their personal and transmitted thoughts. Coughing loudly to cover, he told her, “You have a beautiful voice, my love, but there is something I still don’t understand. Why has my mental fort become a castle, and why are the walls bigger?”

She narrowed her draconian eyes at him, a clear promise of future retribution for his errant thoughts, but stayed on task. “As you already know, everything here is just a construct of your mental landscape. While our Psi Bond has allowed you to develop your mental defenses much faster than you would otherwise, most of your defenses are still due to the Mental bonuses our Psi Bond provides you. The Messeji has increased those bonuses, so your psychic fortifications have become more formidable as well.”

“This is about indirect damage, isn’t it?” Richter asked.

“Yes,” Alma responded. “Your Mental resistance was 55% the last

time you focused on your mental defenses. With the Messeji, that leaped to 100%, hence your walls doubling in height and your fort becoming a small castle.”

When she had first explained how magical resistances worked, she had subdivided the mechanism into direct and indirect damage. Having a 100% resistance to Fire magic would make you nearly invulnerable to spells of that school, though there were exceptions. A fireball would do almost nothing, for instance. That was an example of direct damage.

Indirect damage would be like running through a forest fire. Having a fire resistance would increase your base resistance to burning, which would make it more likely for you to survive, but sure as hell wouldn't make you fireproof. In the case of indirect damage, the resistance bonus was applied to your innate defense value. His Mental and Spiritual resistance were both +1, for instance. That was the average for most humans in The Land. His training with Alma had increased his Mental Defense to +1.9. That was represented by the outer wall of his village. When he was inside of his mindscape, with his mental fortifications in place, that jumped to +4.9. The extra three points of Mental defense were represented by his fort, which had become a castle thanks to the Messeji.

The dragonling had berated him often for not having his mental walls up all the time, even when sleeping, but Richter hadn't been able to manage it

before. It had taken extreme focus that he just couldn't maintain for long without a break. Now that their Psi Bond was increased though, he thought he might be able to hold them in place. Reaching level seven of the bond had made mental exercises easier; he could already feel a greater stability in his mindscape.

He could test it later. What mattered now was that Alma had been right. The Death Knight's *Fear* skill was an example of indirect damage, so he couldn't just shrug off the Mental component even though he now had a 100% Resistance. Getting behind his mental wards increased his Mental defenses to a level that surpassed the attack potential of the *Fear* skill. A quick check of his combat log proved that.

*Mental component of **Fear** (20%) has Attack of 5.4 and is resisted 100% due to your Mental Defense of 8.1 (base 4.9 + 65% Mental Resistance).*

*Emotional component of **Fear** (80%) has Attack of 8.6 and is resisted 11% due to your Spiritual Defense 1.05 (base 1.0 + 5% Mental Resistance).*

There was a similar entry for how he was resisting the *Despair*. Not only was he able to completely ignore the Mental component of the *Fear* skill, but being in his mindscape let him ignore the Spiritual side as well, like a man could ignore the pain of torture with meditation. He had a feeling that the encroaching red fog meant he couldn't ignore the Spiritual attacks forever. Even now that his ability to think clearly had been restored, he still

had limited capabilities with regard to interacting with the real world. He switched his view to what he was actually seeing in the undead throne room. The Death Knight was moving towards him very slowly from his viewpoint, thanks to the time dilation effect of the mindscape, but that didn't alter the fact that the undead was getting closer.

All of that explained the change in Richter's construct, but it still didn't explain the red fog that was oozing ever closer to the walls of the village, and it didn't explain the black shapes he was seeing inside of it. "So that is the gha's *Fear* skill?" he asked. "It looks more like a menstrual fog. And what are those black shapes?"

Alma gave a long-suffering sigh, but otherwise ignored Richter's 'fog' comment. "The black shapes are how your mind is interpreting the attack from the Death Knight's aura. You are safe so long as neither the fog nor the black creatures touch you, but they will both keep coming."

The mist had reached the outer trench and floated right over. The trench was just an affectation, an image to make the mental village more closely resemble the real thing, not an actual mental defense. Thankfully, once it reached the village walls, which were actual representations of his innate Mental defenses, it stopped, as did the black figures inside of it.

After what felt like only a few moments, Richter could see that the

red smoke was pooling at the base of the stone defenses and slowly rising higher. “When the *Fear* mist reaches this castle, it will climb the walls as well. If it reaches the psychic representation of your body, the *Fear* debuff will cripple you again. Perhaps now you see how important growing your base mental defense is and that you should take our training more seriously,” she added archly at the end.

“Yes... I do,” Richter answered sourly. Even in a life-and-death moment, the main woman in his life found a way to say both ‘I told you so’ and ‘This entire situation could have been avoided if you had listened to me.’

She sniffed at him, “That is how long you have to kill the Death Knight.” She paused a moment before flippantly adding, “Unless our Messeji bond runs out first. Then you-”

“Lose my increased defenses,” Richter interjected. “I know.”

“Actually, I was going to say ‘Then you’re fucked,’ but it amounts to the same thing, master, and you shouldn’t interrupt.”

“Thanks,” Richter said with supreme annoyance, “Is there anything else that you can do to help?”

“Just this,” she responded with a twinkle in her eye. She launched herself off the roof towards the encroaching mists. Her voice echoed in his mind, **What you can do, I can do!** Then she opened her mouth and

breathed nearly invisible glass flames over the scarlet mists. They fog dissipated wherever her attack touched, slowing its overall encroachment towards Richter's perch atop the castle. He also caught sight of the black things for the first time. They were stick-like figures with claws and teeth. They looked like the scariest things from the Nightmare Before Christmas. Hearing their high-pitched screams as they died was music to his ears. Richter looked at her in amazement; she really was a true dragon!

Thanking his lucky stars for his wonderful soul familiar, Richter turned his attention back to the real world. Though he'd been talking to Alma for a full minute inside of his mind, the time dilation effect meant that bare seconds had passed in his battle with the Death Knight. The creature had just stepped down to the third level of the dais. Now back in control of his faculties, Richter decided on a plan. He just needed a bit of time. Luckily, he had that covered. With a mental command, he ordered the eight remaining bodaks to attack, but left his other summoned creatures in reserve.

"Ha!" the ghast scoffed, seeing the low-level skeletons moving towards him. "Your pathetic minions only delay your death." To prove his point, the Knight swung his sword through the body of a rime bodak. The reanimated skeleton was destroyed by that one blow, and bones went flying. Richter hated seeing how easily his creature was dispatched, but was not dismayed by the loss. All he needed was time. He couldn't waste any more

energy worrying about the reanimated monsters. He had his own part to play if he was going to survive to see the dawn.

Putting what he hoped was an expression of dismay on his draconian face, he crumpled to his knees as if all hope was lost. The ghaſt's answering laugh showed that Richter's deception was having the desired effect, at least for the moment. Richter hunched over once his knees hit the ground, but he wasn't out of the fight, far from it. Laugh it up asshole, he thought bitterly, then he began to caſt.

His body hid the flashes of black and gold light that began to grow around his hands as he prepared to caſt a ſpell of Deep Magic. The arcane words fell from his lips as he pretended to cower on the ground. More of his summoned creatures fell, almost one a ſecond, but they ſerved their purpose. A part of Richter marveled at how eaſily he was able to reſiſt the ſeductive pull of the Spirit magic inside of his mental conſtruct. A deeper, more ſadistic part of him looked forward to what was about to happen. Though his face remained pointed down, through his psychic bond to his summoned creatures he ſaw that the Death Knight had deſtroyed three ſkeletons and had reached the bottom tier of the dais.

The light ſpread from his hands to his arms, then began to radiate off him like heat ſhimmer in the deſert. Afraid the ghaſt would ſee, Richter ordered his creatures to redouble their efforts to diſtract the undead creature.

The energy on his arms met with a second focus of energy centered on his chest. The two waves of force created a turbulence that manifested as a sphere of black and gold energy between his hands. In the space of a few seconds, it grew from the size of a pea to the size of a softball, then even larger. Crackling bolts of gold and black energy danced across the surface.

He was dual casting the spell and his mana was falling at a precipitous rate. The original cost of one hundred and sixty-eight had swelled to a head-splitting six hundred and twenty-five MP. This was why Richter had refrained from using the new blood perk of his Symbiosis Boon, *Siphon*. While having 10% of the strength of some of the rime bodak he had slain would have come in handy, the fifty MP reduction to his mana pool would preclude him from using his strongest spells.

The magic he was using now was one of his longest casts, taking a full ten seconds to complete. Another two skeletons fell, but it was worth it as Richter approached the ninth second. He sent a mental command to his few remaining creatures, not wanting to risk them being hit by his magic. He didn't actually care about their well-being, but his life, and possibly the lives of all his people, might rely on his spell hitting the target. The remaining bodaks immediately dropped low, abandoning all defense to grab hold of the Death Knight's legs. The Death Knight looked at them in surprise, then suspicion. Too late jabroni, Richter thought with all the vehemence he could

muster. With a last word of Power that had the volume of a shout, he straightened up and thrust his hands forward, casting *Weak Aura Lance*.

The ball of black and gold energy shot forward with the speed of a bullet, lengthening into a javelin of void black and shining gold. The Death Knight's eyes widened at seeing a magic he was unfamiliar with, and he tried to dive out of the way. However massive his strength was, having four bodaks, even of a lower level, holding onto his legs stalled him for a split second. That was all it took.

The spell impacted against the ghaſt's ſtomach, juſt above the groin. It diſappeared, and for a ſecond, nothing happened. Glee began to find its way back onto the undead warrior's face, but then cracks ran through his body, quick as lightning. Wafer-thin pieces of him peeled off and floated into the air before diſappearing. Once the proceſs was done a moment later, no outward change could be ſeen in the Death Knight, but Richter's combat log told another ſtory.

Richter has ſtruck Nien with a dual caſt Weak Aura Lance. All ſpell-type reſiſtances of the Death Knight are decreased by -11.8%. Any reſiſtance dropping below 0% will cauſe a reſultant ſuſceptibility to that ſpell type.

With a grim ſmile, Richter ſent a command to his remaining ſummoned creatures.

Attack.

The fox, spider, forest elemental, rats and wisp all surged forward. The ghaſt wasted no time and laid waſte to the deſenſeſſ bodaks at his feet. With his high attack ſpeed and maſſive Strength, the damage was deſtroying. Before he could diſpatch all of the reanimated ſkeletons however, the froſt bodak ſtruck. With an ice-blue fiſt of bone, it punched the Death Knight in the leg. A ſurge of Water magic ſpread through the ghaſt’s body, afflicting him with *Slow*. A final ſwing of the undead’s ſword made the froſt bodak’s head go flying, but then the other ſummoned creatures attacked.

Meanwhile, Richter reached into his bag for three mana potions. Plucking the ſtoppers from each, he downed them all, ſuppreſſing a faint gag at the licorice taſte. His mana bar began refilling rapidly and the chaos ſeed ran forward. By the time he had croſſed half the diſtance, the ghaſt had already killed his ſpider. The rats were next to uſeſſ and a few had already been ground into paſte under the undead’s boots. They poſed leſſ riſk to Richter’s enemy than a banana peel did to a cartoon character.

The wisp was actually having an effect, being able to paſſ through the Knight’s armor freely. Now even more ſuſceptible to Life magic than before, each of the wisp’s melee attacks was coſting Nien over a dozen HP. The hardwood ſaproling, in contrast, was attacking for all it was worth, but was

doing almost negligible damage against the ghaſt's high level armor.

Richter took another ſtep and the wisp's luck ran out. Performing a perfectly executed ſword ſtrike, the Death Knight cut the Life creature in half. In a flash of ſparks, it winked out of exiſtence. Nien turned to look at the chaos ſeed, fury evident through the ſlats in his helmet. He kicked the ſaproling, ſending it flying through the air. Then the Death Knight ſtarted running towards the chaos ſeed. Which was juſt what Richter had been waiting for.

The chaos ſeed raised an arm, and the Death Knight lifted his ſhield in reſponse, expecting a ſpell. That's not on the menu, Richter thought. Inſtead of magic, he accessed Alma's primary attack *Pſi Blast*, and concentrated the beam. The ray of pure psychic energy paſſed through the ſolid matter of the undead's armor as if it weren't there. Once it reached the ghaſt's rotting fleſh however, it played havoc. Nien had had Mental reſiſtance at the beginning, but now he had nearly a -12% weakness to the Deep Magic. All conſcious thought fled the Death creature's mind and he fell in a clatter of armor.

Richter had no idea how long the *Stun* effect would laſt, but he waſted no time. Reaching down, he ripped off the creature's helmet. Grabbing the ghaſt's face in both hands, Richter pried the jaws apart. Richter drew in a deep breath and time ſeemed to pause for a moment, then he uſed

Glass Flame. Nearly invisible fire poured from Richter's mouth and into Nien's like a sparrow feeding its young. Mania widened his eyes as he thought, burn you bastard. Burn!

He kept the flame on for the full seven seconds, hollowing the undead out. The fire burned through in places and began to do massive damage to the ghaſt's armor. The Knight's health points plummeted towards zero, further hastened by an instinct inside of Richter to drain away the creature's life through his taloned hands. For the first time, he felt the ecstasy of using *Brain Drain*. He drank the ghaſt's very thoughts, and felt like a god! Alma's psyche reveled inside of him even as she continued to fight the red fog that was still encroaching on his mental castle.

In seconds, it was over. Richter dropped the burnt-out husk in disgust and threw back his head. A draconian roar of triumph burst from his throat, and he cast his gaze around at the skeletons lining the room to see if they would try to avenge their master's death. None moved. Richter's dragon lips pulled back in a sharp-toothed smile. He had won!

The moment was ruined when Alma called out to him, **Master! Something is wrong.**

He cast his focus inward, and saw that not only had the red fog not dissipated, it had thickened and was spreading faster than before. Despite

Alma breathing *Glass Fire* and throwing lightning bolts, it was accumulating faster than she could disperse it. She was in no danger, being able to fly, but it had long since overrun the outer walls. The crimson mist had reached the base of the castle and was starting to climb the structure. The construct that represented his consciousness had nowhere to go.

If the ghast suffered the final death, then his aura should have dissipated! she cried out.

That was when Richter heard it.

A large sucking sound heralded the appearance of a purple-black vortex over the Death Knight's body. It covered the corpse in a shell of the same color and a tether shot out to connect to each of the creature's minions. Richter had seen something similar before, in the memories of Jorgen. The fucking thing was trying to siphon strength from the other undead to regenerate!

"No!" Richter shouted, swinging his elementum blade at the Death magic dome.

He might as well have attacked a mountain.

The magic at play was primordial and as old as The Land's Places of Power; it rebuffed Richter's attack as if it had never happened. Though he did not know it, Richter was witnessing an ability that could only be obtained

by advancing a Death Place of Power to level two. The *Death's Servant* ability let the Death Master transfer his death to seven of his pledged servants who would die in his stead. The ability was not limited to just seven victims though. It could be spread to as many of the Master's servants as were willing and nearby. Every seven victims increased Nien's power by another 30%. Triggered at the moment of death, the process could not be interrupted and the Master was effectively invulnerable until it finished. As the bodaks had no free will to speak of, they were all being sacrificed to feed the gha'st's life and boost his power.

Before Richter's very eyes, the bones of all the bodaks began to blacken as they took on the damage the gha'st had suffered. Nien's own body regenerated, and even worse, the debuff from the aura lance was transferred as well. He got up into a kneeling position, the maximum height the dome of Death magic allowed, and glared at Richter with pure hatred.

The chaos seed didn't know exactly what was going on, but did know it was most likely bad enough to end his life. It was not the time for half measures. Reaching into his Bag of Holding, he pulled out every psi crystal he had gathered in the dungeon. He held them in his cupped hands and breathed deeply. Pure Mental energy poured into his body even as Death energy poured into the Death Knight. Both Nien and Richter willed the power to flow faster, but neither had control as they called upon Powers

greater than either of them could ever hope to control.

Richter won the race. He finished absorbing over three hundred levels worth of psychic energy a moment before the vortex of Death energy winked out of existence. He knew he had no chance of defeating the ghaſt by ſtrength of arms ſo he did the one thing he knew he ſhouldn't do. He looked Nien in the eyes. The Death Knight's own gaze widened in ſhock as a psychic bond was created. A moment later, Richter recalled the warning that a door, once created, can ſwing both ways. At Psi Bond level ſeven, the bond was ſtronger than he had ever experienced before. For the firſt time, Richter experienced an ancient form of Thought combat.

*You have engaged in Psychic Battle with the **Death Knight Nien**.*

Richter's mindſcape remained the ſame, and he ſtill ſtood atop the caſtle of his mind's defense. The red miſt reached halfway up the walls of his mental defenses and were continuing to riſe. As he ſtared out over his ſettlement, he ſaw that the foreſt directly outside of his village had diſappeared. Now it was a barren waſteland of black rock and twisted trees. A roiling ſky of dark clouds hung over the tableau, blocking all direct light. In comparison to the ſun ſhining above his own green land, the two mindſcapes were the very eſſence of life and death.

The mental representation of the Death Knight ſtood at the border of

the two lands. No fortifications were present within the ghaſt's mind, but as Richter watched, ſkeletons roſe inside the deadlands. The minions were a function of a Warrior Talent, *Intimidation*, adding to Nien's Mental attack ſtrength. The Knight was alſo wearing armor that represented another Warrior Talent, *Mental Fortitude*. Nien had always uſed the Talent to protect himſelf from mind-altering ſpells in battle. In the ghaſt's mindscape, it ſerved a more direct function in protecting the creature's body, which was, juſt as it was with Richter, a representation of his mind.

Unlike in the real world, the Knight's body was only five feet tall and his phyſique was little more than average. That was becauſe in the mindscape one's power was affected by many factors, but the attributes of Strength and Conſtitution were not among them. Intelligence, on the other hand, did have a direct impact on one's baſe mental attack and defense. As Richter's ſtat was much higher than Nien's, his mental ſtrength was actually higher even without taking his training with Alma into account.

That advantage did not laſt.

Nien looked around in confuſion, but then realization crossed his face. The ghaſt examined the caſtle and ſaw Richter's avatar was ſtill ſtanding atop it. The creature began to laugh, the ſame ſludge-filled chortle that the chaos ſeed had heard before. "You think theſe mental games will protect you?" the Death Knight ſhouted. "My maſter told me of your

Thought magic and placed a piece of himself inside of me! Witness the power of the eldritch!”

With that pronouncement, the Death Knight stuck his gauntleted fingers into his own neck and grabbed a bone his lich master had placed under his skin before sending him to the surface world. The reliquary was a gift from the eldritch master and had been flooded with parasitic magic. In the mindscape, there was no actual bone under the ghaſt’s skin of course, but the action ſtill ſerved to expreſs the undead’s deſire. In the real world, the eldritch magic in the bone reſponded to the Death Knight’s will.

The Power contained within the reliquary flooded the ghaſt’s body. Veins ſtood ſtark againſt his expoſed ſkin, glowing neon green, and his eyes ſhone like ſpotlights of the ſame color. Nien’s body grew by ſeven feet and his muſcles grew to match. The armor he wore enlarged to ſuit its new frame. From his now twelve feet of height, the ghaſt looked at Richter’s Mental deſenſes in contempt. When he ſpoke again, there was a reſonance to the undead’s voice that ſounded like the lich’s voice was ſuperimpoſed over his own.

“Now you can witneſs the foreſight and power of the eldritch. You are not ſafe behind your paltry walls, fooliſh human. I will ſweep aſide the deſenſes of your mind and viſit horrors upon you that ſhall make even your nightmares flee in terror. You ſhall tell me all that you know and ſoon, your

dominion will be mine. Now,” Nien pronounced, pinning Richter with a baleful glare that promised tortures beyond the chaos seed’s imagination, “you shall learn the true meaning of pain.”

Richter glared back for long seconds before his face relaxed and he shouted his response, “Yeah. You’d probably be right, but you forgot one thing.”

The ghast cocked his head in query, right before a shadow crossed over the illusory sun overhead. Nien looked up, and got to see the rare vision of a dragon. She was no longer the size of a large dog, but instead was now the size of a greyhound bus. Swelled with the power of three hundred levels of psychic energy, Alma descended like the wrath of the banished gods.

Confronted with the monstrosity attacking him, Nien completely forgot about Richter. The Death Knight started to marshal the eldritch magic he’d been given in a vain attempt to protect himself. Even though the chaos seed was now being ignored, he still decided to finish his earlier statement. In a normal voice that had no chance of being heard by the Death Knight, he said, “You forgot that if you mess with me, you mess with my whole crew.”

Alma struck. One taloned claw the size of a dinner table smashed Nien to the ground and the neon green glow of energy snuffed out from around the Death Knight. The ghast cried out in pain and fear as her talon

pierced straight through his entire body. With deliberate care, she tore off his limbs one at a time, reveling in his terror. The mental anguish the undead was experiencing was almost “physical” in this realm, and she drank in the sensation. When only the head remained, she drew her claw, letting her talon slide out of Nien’s body.

She was not being merciful. There was no mercy in her gaze as she stared in pure hatred at the creature that had tried to kill her master. Nien looked up with an expression of shock and horror on his ruined face. He opened his mouth to speak, either to beg, threaten or bargain. The words were never heard.

Alma breathed glass flame down on Nien’s head and torso, turning the body into cinders, and then dust. The particles blew away in the wind of her breath, and all traces of the undead were scoured from Richter’s mind. With her foe utterly vanquished, Alma reared back in all of her draconic glory and showed her master what the roar of a true dragon sounded like.

Looking at her in love and astonishment, he whispered, “My little predator.”

Leaving the tableau of his mindscape, he turned his focus back to the real world. Once again, only seconds had passed, though the ghaſt’s mental torture had laſted for a quarter of an hour. Stalking forward, Richter had both

of his weapons raised to attack if the undead managed yet another trick to defy death. Nien just stayed on his knees though, staring forward with a slack-jawed expression and completely vacant eyes.

His mind had been utterly destroyed, and only fragments of the ghost's self remained in the empty shell of his body.

Richter's lips pulled back in a snarl and one hand wove in an arcane gesture. Golden light surrounded his fingers. When the spell was done, for the next two minutes the ghost's soul was bound to this realm. Placing both hands on the creature's head, the chaos seed used *Brain Drain* again. He was worried time might run out as less than a minute remained for the Messeji, but the energy he had absorbed from the psi crystals turned what was normally a stream of psychic energy into a raging river.

The ghost's health, mana and stamina sank like a stone through air, but still it was not enough for Richter. As he feasted on the residual psychic energy in Nien's body, his bloodlust rose. The chaos seed's taloned hands dug into the flesh on either side of the ghost's neck. Deep furrows appeared and putrid fluid squirted over Richter's hands. With a roar of savage anger, Richter wrenched the head left, then right, then left again. With the final twist, Nien's head came clean off his body. All of his status bars bottomed out, this time never to rise again.

As the rainbow of the undead's soul stuff swirled around Richter, the chaos seed allowed himself a faint chuckle. I captured the soul of a Soul Eater, he thought. How wonderful. The ribbon of colored energy disappeared into Richter's bag. With a dismissive scoff, Richter let the head fall from his hands onto the ground with a wet *smack*.

So ended the story of Nien the Reaver.

CHAPTER 71 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



A kaleidoscope of notifications flooded Richter's vision. The first told him about his haul thanks to *Soul Trap*.

You have captured:	Durability: 25/25
Soul of Ghast Death	Item Class: Uncommon
Knight	Stone Level: Luminous
	Soul Level: Luminous
	Status: Filled
	Weight: 0.4 kg

He minimized all the rest. Richter still wasn't alone in the room. The stone door had now reopened, but the dozen or so bodaks had all turned their heads to look directly at him. Richter panned from left to right and back again. He'd known from the beginning that even if he killed the Death

Knight he might still be killed by the undead's minions. He had made his peace with it. What was important was that he had removed the threat of the Death Knight and had preserved the lives of his people. Waiting for whatever would come, he just held his elementum short sword in one hand and his mace in the other. He wasn't going down without a fight.

Richter was ready for anything, or so he thought. He felt nothing but astonishment when the bodaks clapped their fists to their chests in salute one after the other. First the Warriors at the bottom of the dais, then the rime skeletons, paid him deference. The skeletons on the final level of the dais did the same, before each monster turned towards the throne and went down on one knee. There, with heads bowed, they froze into immobility.

A flash of light appeared above the throne. It flickered several more times before resolving into a four-and-a-half-foot-tall figure with a crown upon his head. The spirit turned towards Richter and regarded him calmly. After about a minute, the king started walking down the dais towards Richter. He was neither hurried nor threatening. Still, the chaos seed had learned his lesson about trusting random spirits.

Sheathing his short sword in a smooth motion, he cast *Weak Detect Hostile Intent*. Gold light surrounded his hands for the two-second cast time. After he finished the spell, an invisible pulse radiated out from his body, illuminating anything hostile in red light. Unfortunately, it only worked on

creatures within ten yards of him so he had to wait until the spirit got within range. Richter kept a taloned hand wrapped tightly around the hilt of his mace, but, thankfully, violence was not required.

When the spirit entered the spell's radius, its body remained a ghostly white. Richter still did not fully relax his guard, but he did breathe a bit easier. It raised both hands and he saw they were covered in ghostly rings, all except the index finger on its left hand. It looked at the body of the slain Death Knight then back at Richter meaningfully. The spirit did not speak, but it clearly felt it had communicated its message.

The Universe apparently agreed.

Congratulations! You have unlocked a Quest: **Lord of the Sepulcher**

The specter of this dungeon's former ruler has appeared to you. Though it did not speak, it communicated clearly. On your travels through this dungeon, you have seen ample evidence that the undead you are fighting were once kindir. The ghast Nien admitted that he had been corrupting the spirits of this place, but that power may not have come from his Profession. The spirit of the kindir king has indicated that it might have been stolen by Nien.

Success Conditions: Find the ring and learn to use its magic.

Reward: Unlock the secret of this dungeon's power.

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: Possible recurrence of a hostile agency in this place.

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Not as though I really have a choice, Richter thought. He selected “Yes.”

As if feeling the chaos seed’s acceptance, the king’s specter executed a courtly bow. Then it walked back over to the throne and sat. Once again, the tomb was silent as... well, a tomb. The spirit looked straight ahead, paying no further attention to Richter.

The chaos seed looked at the king for long moments but, just like the bodaks, it seemed to pose no further threat. Seeing as how it hadn’t turned red when he had tested it for hostile intent, the chaos seed turned his attention to the body of the ghastr. He started to bend down to examine the remains, but another prompt appeared.

*The **Messeji** has ended!*

Richter felt the strangest pulling sensation, as if his very core was being split apart. There was no pain, but there was a definite sense of loss. Blue-white light poured out of his eyes and coalesced into a swirling ball of Thought energy. The time of bonding was done. Richter looked at the

energy and sent a questioning thought towards it. There was a faint resonance, but no response.

During the Messeji, the icon on his display that had always indicated Alma had disappeared. It had been replaced by a small dragon-like humanoid, obviously a representation of his altered form. Now, it changed back to Alma's shape, the symbol blue-white like the figure before him. A countdown started, running down from seventy-seven seconds.

His body reverted swiftly. Scales were reabsorbed into his skin and the structure of his body transitioned back into its original state. This process was... uncomfortable, but only lasted a moment. It took Alma a bit longer to coalesce. After seven seconds, the sphere of psychic light had resolved into a creature of the same color, now clearly recognizable as his familiar.

Hello again, master, she greeted him. Then, with an expression of utter devilishness, she shot forward, passing through his body as if he wasn't there. Every goosebump he had stood up all at once, and he got the worst case of the willies he'd ever had.

"Aaaaah!" he screeched out. His rather ladylike scream was loud enough to wake the dead. Then Richter looked over at the still-kneeling and immobile bodaks. Well, he amended silently, not really. That didn't change the fact that his familiar had just goosed him!

Alma! Don't do that!

The only response he got was psychic laughter as she continued to zip around the room. Her body was growing more solid by the moment.

Be careful you don't get stuck, you horrible beast! he thought at her. This time, she sent him the mental equivalent of an eye roll.

Shaking his head, he reflected on the experience of the Messeji. It had vastly increased his power, and he had enjoyed the feeling of unity with Alma. Over the past several months, she had become more than just a familiar; she was almost a part of him. The Messeji had removed that “almost.” When it was ending, he had felt a sense of loss, but now, a bare minute later, Richter was glad to have only one set of thoughts in his mind again. It seemed that even Deep Magic couldn't overcome his natural independence... thank Abrams and Whedon.

Seventy-seven seconds later, Alma completed her transition, and was once again a creature the size of a large cat, with beautiful silky black scales. She landed on his upraised arm, and spoke aloud once again, “We did it, master!” Her words had a slight sibilant hiss, but otherwise, she sounded the same.

Richter smiled back at her and scratched the top of her head affectionately, “I could not have done it without you.” He was still marveling

at hearing her ability to speak aloud. After sharing such a long time together in his mindscape, it wasn't exactly shocking anymore, but it was still amazing.

"We burned him from the inside out," she said, laughing. There was definitely an edge of malicious violence in it. Once upon a time it would have bothered him to hear someone embrace violence like that, but now he could only smile at his soul familiar because he felt the same wild joy at having won!

"That we did, my love," he replied, with a vicious smile of his own. Looking at his beautiful familiar, he decided to hold her close to him for a few minutes. Claiming the ring and the ghaſt's other loot could wait until his prompts had been addressed. From the crooning she was doing as she nestled in his arms, she agreed.

The first few notifications dealt with the experience he had earned. They were more than welcome!

*You have been awarded **331,151** experience (base 3,784,591 x 0.07 x 1.25) from Brain Drain against Level 48 ghaſt Soul Eater.*

TRING! TRING! TRING!

*You have reached levels **36, 37 and 38!** Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. You are awarded the following points to distribute:*

	Per Level	Total
Stat Points	As a Chaos Seed, you gain 6 Stat Points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4	18
Talent Points	As a Chaos Seed, you receive 15 Talent Points instead of the usual 10. You receive an additional 15 Talent Points from your Profession and Specialty for having a 100% affinity in Enchanting	126
Chaos Points	You receive 8 Chaos Points due to your Blessing by the Lords of Chaos	76
Skill % Points	+25% to the skill of your choice	+75%

Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

Now that you have progressed more than one level, you must allocate your Stat and Skill Percentage Points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.

His Talent Points and Chaos Points he would address when he was safely back in the village. There was no question where his Skill Percentage

Points would go, however.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 49 in **Enchanting**. All enchantments are now +49% more effective and you have an increased chance of enchantments taking hold.*

More skill progression prompts appeared.

*Congratulations! Your familiar has reached levels **41** and **42**!*

*Congratulations! You have reached subskill levels 10, 11, ..., 19 in **Inspiring Leadership**. +19% to chance of war party members earning Field Advancements. +19% to the power of Field Advancements of any party members under your command or the command of your subordinates.*

Apparently, asking to be locked inside a dungeon with two dozen Professional skeletons and an undead Specialist killer made him seem pretty badass in the eyes of his warband. He'd rarely ever jumped ten skill levels all at once, but then again, he'd also rarely done something as monumentally stupid and deadly as fighting a level forty-eight Soul Eater in one-on-one combat.

*Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in: **Inspiring Leadership**. Allies fighting near you may now obtain Field Advancements whether they are in your warband or not, albeit with an 80% penalty of this occurring. This penalty decreases by 20% when reaching successive ranks.*

*You have received 1,250 (base 1,000 x 1.25) bonus experience for reaching level 10 in the subskill: **Inspiring Leadership**.*

Unsurprisingly, several members of the warband had achieved new Field Promotions that Richter would have to bestow later. Caulder had also advanced in his old ones.

*For standing against a sea of countless foes and remaining strong, Caulder has advanced a Field Advancement to **Stem the Tide IV**. +4 Defense to each piece of Medium Armor worn by Sergeant Caulder.*

*For shouting rallying cries that increased the Fighting Spirit of his War Party, Caulder has advanced a Field Advancement to **Cried Aloud III**.*

“Rallying Cry” now increases the Attack and Defense of any allies who hear it by +3 for 7 minutes. Cooldown: 18 minutes.

Richter also earned a staggering number of War Points considering that he’d only killed one creature. It proved once again that fighting other creatures with the War Leader skill was the very best way to advance his own.

*For slaying **1 Focused Specialist Ghast Death Knight**, you have been awarded 120 War Points (War Points multiplied by 20 for slaying a Focused Specialist)*

*Congratulations! You have destroyed an enemy **War Party**. The War*

*Leader's rank was **Apprentice**. For killing a War Leader of the third rank, all War Points gained are tripled.*

*War Points gained: **360***

*Total War Points: **1112**.*

Another prompt reminded him that there were more benefits to slaying an enemy war leader than simple points.

*Know This! For personally killing a **War Leader** one rank above you, you are randomly assigned two **Promotions** the enemy War Leader possessed (if the War Leader possessed two promotions that you do not already have).*

You will be given the lowest level of the gained promotions.

*Congratulations! For slaying the War Leader Nien the Reaver you have been awarded the Promotion: **Death Disciple I**. Necromancers in your warband have +1% spell power to Death magic and your entire war party enjoys +1% Resistance to Life magic. Advance this skill by including more Death magi in your future war parties.*

Nien the Reaver only had one Promotion that you did not already possess.

Richter wasn't overly disappointed at getting only one new Promotion from the war leader's death. A promotion he had gotten from another slain foe, Si'nak the Witch Doctor, required that he sacrifice innocents before a battle to bolster his power. It still sickened him to think how that goblin

bastard must have slaughtered defenseless people over and over to gain that particular Promotion.

Besides, one of his old Promotions had advanced and he had been awarded another.

*Congratulations! Your war party killed more than ten times its number in an underground battle. Your Promotion has been advanced to **Subterranean II**. +10% to defense when fighting underground.*

*Congratulations! Your war party has cleared out a nest of undead whose median level was at least +5 above the median level of your warband. For surviving this peril, your party has been awarded the Promotion: **Life over Death I**. +1 Damage when fighting Death creatures.*

The next prompt was the one he had been waiting on. Richter heard the battle cry again.

RAAAAR!

*Congratulations! You have won your first **Duel**. In a battle to the Final Death, Richter of the Mist Village is victorious! Nien of the Shadow Trench has met the final death.*

*You have won +50 **Fame Points***

*Total Fame Points: **31,632***

Know This! Nien was a Vassal of another Master. If ever this Master learns

your identity, you will lose at least 50,000 Relationship Points with that individual.

Richter's eyes widened anew and he let out a low whistle. It wasn't surprising that killing someone else's vassal would piss that person off, but fifty thousand RPs was a serious hit! Even if their relationship was *neutral* before, that would be enough to drop them all the way down to *loathing*. Still, it probably didn't make a difference, seeing as how Nien being sent here was tantamount to a declaration of war. Also, Richter and Hisako were planning on wiping out this other Master anyway so *comme ci, comme ça*.

He turned his attention back to the prompts.

*In accordance to the ancient **Rule of the Duel**, you are now awarded the Stakes. You have gained control of the Heart Crystal of a Place of Power, **the Shadow Trench**. This Place of Power is a confluence of Water and Death ley lines.*

As he read the prompt, a disturbance began in the ghast's body. Even the severed head began to glow. Particles of both blue and purple-black light began to rise from the body. They gathered above it and the flow of energy increased. The corpse rose into the air, two ghastly pieces, and for an irrational second, Richter thought, holy shit. Is this a Quickening? Then a sadistic grin crossed his face. There can be only one, mothafucka!

The light flowed faster, siphoning energy from the dead ghast and collecting it in a small vortex. The hair on Richter's arms stood on end as a feeling of static electricity filled the air. Then the flow stopped and the light coalesced into a simple clear gem. It hovered in midair before floating over and landing gently in his hands. Like his own Heart Crystal, it was an unassuming circular gem, completely clear and about the size of his palm. It boggled his mind that one of the most powerful items in The Land was such an example of simplicity.

*Know This! A **Heart Crystal** is the key to Mastery of a Place of Power. You are already a Master, however, so cannot take personal control of another Place of Power. If you meet the requirements, you may assign a Vassal. This person will become a Master, but will still be beholden to you in accordance with mutually agreed upon terms.*

Richter's thirst for power surged! Places of Power were not common. They were either well-defended fortresses or hidden. His own had lain unclaimed for at least several hundred years. The power it had given him went beyond simply the bonuses to spell power and spell resistance. His settlement spell, *Confusing Mists*, had kept him and his people safe for months. The only reason the Quickening had grown, rather than some other lesser tree, was that it had been able to draw upon the energy of his Place of Power while it grew. And even given all of that, he knew that he had only

scratched the surface of his potential as a Master.

To give credence to that belief, there was one more message about the gem.

*More options may be discovered if the **Heart Crystal** is examined in the appropriate setting.*

Completely cryptic, but the corner of Richter's mouth still edged up as he looked at the innocuous gem. He wasn't sure how, but this little thing was going to help make his dreams come true.

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The Heart Crystal went into Richter's Bag of Holding. He intended to keep the knowledge of it limited to as few people as possible. That might be a vain hope as his warband had heard Nien's challenge, but then again, they might not have understood exactly what a Duel entailed. He hoped that was the case. The crystal was just too great a temptation. Even good people might turn ugly if they felt a Place of Power was within their grasp.

Hoping for the best, he went on to his next prompts.

*Congratulations! You have captured a memory from a **Ghast Soul Eater**. This memory can only be accessed for the next twenty-three hours and fifty-one minutes before dissolution into the ether. Experiencing this memory will be instantaneous in regard to your timeline.*

That part was almost expected. Richter hadn't been sure that using *Brain Drain* on the ghast would obtain a memory, but it wasn't exactly a surprise. The level seven facet of Alma's ability seemed more likely to be

triggered with the killing of high level creatures. The next prompt was a surprise though.

*Know This! The ghastr **Nien** that died via Brain Drain was suffused with the Eldritch energy of his Master at the time of his death. Due to the peculiar interaction between Mental and Eldritch magic, you may experience snippets of the Master's memories as well.*

Richter's heart started beating faster. The beginning of the problems with the undead had been because he had delved into a memory that the eldritch mage had been present in. The lich had looked into Jorgen the Death Knight's eyes as Richter had been looking out of them. Richter wasn't sure if the old adage of eyes being the windows to the soul was true, but what he did know was that it could create a psychic link. That very fact was why he was still standing and the Death Knight was hurtling towards whatever hell undead went to after the Final Death. It had only been swift action on Richter's part that had let him escape before the lich's mind could touch his own.

If he now had direct access to the lich's own memories, the danger of viewing this memory could be even more grave. True, it was only a memory, but that had been the case last time as well.

Richter looked at the blinking prompt. It was different from most

other notifications in that the border pulsed with light. After several long moments, he shook his head. Months ago, he would have thrown caution to the wind and dived into the memory. Since that time though, he had shed blood and lost friends. Through those experiences, he'd gained at least a modicum of wisdom. Before he made a decision that might affect not only his life but the lives of his people and his allies, he would gain the counsel of those he trusted.

Richter minimized the memory prompt. It would only last one day, but that was more than enough time for him to get back to the village and talk to Hisako and a few other people. The next prompt let him know he'd fulfilled the terms of the next link in a quest chain he'd started.

Congratulations! You have unlocked a Settlement Quest: **Know Your Backyard II**

You have discovered both wonders and dangers in your domain. Never forget the importance of exploration.

Success Conditions: Examine three sites that are at least *Notable* Locations within your domain and determine their importance

Reward: Unknown.

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: Increased frequency of future attacks.

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Congratulations! You have completed the Settlement Quest: **Know Your Backyard II**

The quest was automatically accepted as you have fulfilled the completion objectives. You have explored your domain and discovered three locations that are Notable or above.

Reward: 2,500 (base 2,000 x 1.25) experience points

Reward: Village-wide Loyalty +10

Reward: Decreased frequency of undead attacks within your domain by -70%

Base Loyalty: +1575 x +25% Undefeated x +12% Administrator x +10%

Health

Total Loyalty Points: +2315

The original quest had been to find three locations of the lowest rank, *notable*. By finding three interesting locales of the next rank, he had fulfilled the qualifications of the next stage of the quest chain. Even better, he got access to the next ring.

Congratulations! You have unlocked a Settlement Quest: **Know Your Backyard III**

The locations you have found have focused mostly on the undead, but many other dangers can exist. Be ever vigilant. Discover both wonders and dangers in your domain. Never forget the importance of exploration.

Success Conditions: Examine three sites that are at least *Significant* Locations within your domain and determine their importance

Reward: Unknown

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: Unknown

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

He chose “Yes” again, securing the third link in the quest chain. The rewards of fulfilling the second link had been modest. Truth be told, the Loyalty increases were more valuable to him than the XP. If he could gain another thousand Loyalty Points, the Productivity of his village would get another 20% boost. It seemed like a far-off goal, but every little bit helped. There was one other benefit to finishing settlement quests: a boost to his Administration skill.

Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 10 and 11 in

Administration. +11% to Morale, Loyalty, and Production for your village.

Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in:

Administration. A new Job has been discovered: **Town Administrator.**

Assigning someone to this position allows the settlement to benefit from your Administration skill and all of its subskills even if you are not present, in addition to the settlement bonus for this position. If the person assigned has a higher Administration skill level, your settlement will benefit from it as long as that person is within your domain.

*You have received 2,500 (base 2,000 \times 1.25) bonus experience for reaching level 10 in the skill: **Administration.***

Richter already knew exactly who would fit that position. With his prompts finally exhausted, he turned his gaze back towards the ghast's body. Both the head and the body had fallen back down to the floor after the power of the Heart Crystal had been siphoned. A gross greyish-yellow fluid was flowing out of the body. It was giving off a foul smell, but Richter ignored that and collected some in a vial. If the Death Knight's blood could make his Dungeon stronger, then it was worth the inconvenience. He also collected a few vials for Tabia to experiment on. Once that was done, he began to take off the knight's armor. As soon as he touched the plate mail though, he began to have a queasy feeling and a warning notification appeared.

You have come into contact with a toxic material. You are now afflicted with Necromium Poisoning. -1 HP every 5 seconds for the next 25 seconds.

Richter snatched his hand back. There didn't seem to be any further negative effects. He waited a full minute, but after the twenty-five seconds had elapsed, he didn't lose anything more than the five HP the prompt had warned him of. Looking at the armor, Richter gritted his teeth and grabbed it again. As the metal poisoned him once more, the nausea came back. There was also a small amount of pain that he easily endured. The worst part about touching the black armor was that it made him feel... unclean.

Distasteful or not, he removed the entire set of armor.

You have found: Necromium Barbut of Balance	Defense: +34 Durability: 113/128 Item Class: Uncommon Armor Type: Head, Heavy Quality: Superb Weight: 8.8 kg Traits: +7 to Balance
You have found:	Defense: +29 (Max: 38)

<p>Necromium Breastplate of Death Power</p>	<p>Durability: 124/182</p> <p>Item Class: Unusual</p> <p>Armor Type: Chest, Heavy</p> <p>Quality: Superb</p> <p>Weight: 23.5 kg</p> <p>Traits: +8 to Death Magic skill</p>
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Necromium Spiked Plate Vambraces of Death Strike</p>	<p>Defense: +32</p> <p>Durability: 151/163</p> <p>Item Class: Unusual</p> <p>Armor Type: Arms, Heavy</p> <p>Quality: Superb</p> <p>Weight: 9.4 kg</p> <p>Traits: +4 Death Damage to any melee strike</p>
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Rune-Etched Necromium Gauntlets of Swift Strike</p>	<p>Defense: +38</p> <p>Durability: 125/139</p> <p>Item Class: Scarce</p> <p>Armor Type: Hands, Heavy</p> <p>Quality: Exquisite</p> <p>Weight: 7.8 kg</p>

	<p>Traits:</p> <p>+31% to melee attack speed</p> <p>Inscribed with the Rune <i>Mata-Sefuni</i>: 5 mana stolen from enemies with each strike</p>
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Necromium Greaves of Shadow Pull</p>	<p>Defense: +21 (Max: 33)</p> <p>Durability: 85/134</p> <p>Item Class: Unusual</p> <p>Armor Type: Legs, Heavy</p> <p>Quality: Superb</p> <p>Weight: 8.3 kg</p> <p>Traits: Wearer can draw on shadows and darkness to increase Stamina regeneration by 340% for 1 minute.</p> <p>Charges: 168/168</p>
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Necromium Boots of Fire Repulsion</p>	<p>Defense: +30</p> <p>Durability: 122/131</p> <p>Item Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Armor Type: Feet, Heavy</p>

	Quality: Superb Weight: 6.1 kg Traits: +6% Resistance to Fire magic
You have found a Complete Armor Set: Necromium Plate Armor (Fitted to Nien the Reaver) Armor Class: Unusual	Armor Set Bonus: Defense given by each piece increased by 25% Fitted Bonus: +10% Defense when worn by Nien the Reaver. -10% Defense when worn by anyone else. Special Bonus: +10% Life Resistance +5% Death Power Necromium armor will slowly poison any non-Death creature that comes into contact with it

The entire set of armor had some awesome enchantments! He couldn't wear any of it because it was made of Necromium, but the Forge of Heavens would destroy it anyway. Even better, one of the items was runed! He was sure the village researchers would enjoy getting their hands on it... as long as they wore gloves.

The Death Knight's weapons and shield were also impressive.

You have found: Savaging Necromium Estoc	Attack: 29-38 Durability: 153/164 Item Class: Unusual Weapon Type: One-handed Longblade, Melee Quality: Superb Weight: 5.5 kg Traits: +4% chance to score critical hits +156% damage on critical hit
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Necromium Kite Shield of Distraction	Defense: 19 Durability: 101/112 Item Class: Uncommon Armor Type: Shield, Heavy Quality: Superb Weight: 4.9 kg Traits: Looking too long at this shield can cause <i>Distract</i> , decreasing the concentration
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	of the afflicted by 14%
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You have found: Necromium Dirk of Piercing	Attack: 12-15 Durability: 84/90 Item Class: Scarce Weapon Type: Short Blade, Melee Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 1.8 kg Traits: +7% to Stabbing Damage
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Richter couldn't help but shake his head. There was no way he could have survived a stand-up fight with this creature. Not only had Nien's stats been crazy high, but the undead had been outfitted for bear! Every single piece of gear not only had an insanely high defense, but they were also enchanted to make the creature a killing machine. Heavy armor was no joke.

The fact that the undead had been a literal death machine didn't bother Richter though. All he could see now were new enchantments for him to learn. His smile stretched from ear to ear. Every one of the enchantments was new to him. Richter was pretty sure that he could sell armor like this for hundreds or thousands of gold, even with the fact that it could only be worn

by undead. The real value wasn't gold though, it was the power the enchantments would give him and his people. Richter finally understood why he had been so drawn to the Profession of Enchanting. As his enemies grew weaker, he could use their former strength to grow stronger. That was an idea that had always been his gaming style: build up his strength and then attack with devastating force. They would never see him coming!

The item that really caught his attention was the gauntlets. Now that he was looking closer, he could see the rune that had been etched into the palm of both pieces of armor. Richter knew almost nothing about runes. He had actually only been able to identify a few of them, and those were symbols of the Basic Elements that had been revealed by his first Lore book. Hardly secret knowledge. Being able to identify those few runes was one thing, but being able to recreate them was something else. The tech required to have a basic understanding of runes required a great deal of Research Points and there were several prereqs in front of him. He was pretty sure it would be worth it though. From what he had seen, runes could create wondrous magic that could last centuries. Runes might offer his work true immortality.

Every piece of armor went into his bag. He'd lost several hundred health while taking it off the Death Knight's body. Unfortunately, the toxic effects seemed cumulative. After five minutes he was losing more than one

HP per second. Luckily, a Life Master didn't need to worry too much about that. Casting *Weak Slow Heal* and *Minor Slow Heal* in succession brought him back to full health.

Richter moved onto the items the undead had been wearing.

Ring of Shadow Shift	Durability: 25/25 Item Class: Scarce Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Allows the wearer to shift to the Shadow Dimension for five seconds real time
Ring of Health	Durability: 19/19 Item Class: Scarce Item Quality: Exquisite Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +82 Health
Ring of Stamina	Durability: 14/14 Item Class: Uncommon Item Quality: Well Crafted

	Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +37 Stamina
Ring of Stamina	Durability: 13/13 Item Class: Uncommon Item Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +38 Stamina
Ring of Mana	Durability: 16/16 Item Class: Uncommon Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +43 Mana

The Ring of Shadow Shift immediately caught his attention. The others were great boosts as well and Richter would definitely be using some of them as upgrades, but he didn't want to wait on this one. After shaking the ring to remove a bit of the undead's decayed flesh, he took off his weaker Ring of Health. His max HPs dropped by forty-three, but it let him slip the new *unusual* ring on.

At first there was no discernible change, but then Richter focused on the ring. Suddenly, the darkened corners of the room seemed to come alive. It was like turning the contrast up to the max on photoshop... They even seemed to reach towards him slightly. Richter walked over to the closest shadow and slowly extended a hand. As his fingers came into contact with the undulating blackness, something startling happened.

Everything in his vision switched color values. He hated admitting his previous love for photography, even to himself, but it looked exactly like when he would push the “desaturate” function on a camera. He could still see everything easily, but it became a contrast of light and dark. An icon of a man’s silhouette appeared in the corner of his vision with a “5” next to it. Richter kept his attention on it, and several seconds later it ticked down to four.

His brows furrowed. What was the significance? He was about to talk to Alma about it, but when he looked at her, he got a surprise. She was in the same spot, still flapping her wings to hover in midair. It was something he’d seen her do thousands of times, but this time it looked like she was moving through honey. Richter walked over and watched bemusedly as her wings beat slowly up and down. When he reached out to touch her, his hand passed through her body with only a slight resistance. The counter next to his silhouette ticked down to “3.”

Already used to the idea of time dilation from his mindscape, he immediately picked up on what was happening. Time moved more slowly here too! Richter recalled the prompt associated with the ring, “Allows the wearer to shift to the Shadow Dimension for five seconds real time.”

Alma also didn’t seem to be able to see him, even though he waved his hand in front of her face. This ring was amazing!

That was when the shadow bat attacked.

The aerial monster swooped down from behind him, silent as death. It latched onto his neck, its teeth sharp like knives but also freezing, like icicles in deep winter. Richter’s health began to plummet. Even as he screamed, his attention flew to his HPs, which were dropping like the milliseconds on a countdown clock.

His shoulders hunched up instinctively, and he reached back to grab the creature attacking him. Richter’s fingers passed partly through its body, but he was still able to grab hold. He yanked once to no avail, but then pulled harder and it came free. He felt its fangs tear his flesh and he gained a Bleeding status. The bat writhed in his fist and he quickly used *Analyze* to know what he was dealing with.

Name: Shadow Bat

Disposition: Blind Rage

Shadow Bats are common denizens of the Shadow Realm and are much more likely to be found underground. Where one appears, another is soon to follow. Their bite will not only drain a victim of blood, but also their

very life force. The trait almost all monsters of the Shadow Realm share is an all-consuming hatred for creatures of other planes.

Special Attack: Life Drain – Once latched on in a bite, the shadow bat will drain the very life from a body; its bite will otherwise leave victims weakened for a short time.

Level: 2

Health: 58 **Mana:** 12 **Stamina:** 70

Strength: 3

Agility: 12

Dexterity: 14

Constitution: 5

Endurance: 7

Intelligence: 1

Wisdom: 2

Charisma: 3

Luck: 8

Level two? A level two creature had taken away more than forty points of his health in three seconds! It continued to writhe in his grip, one wing free. Richter stared at it in anger and revulsion. Its face was three circular mouths filled with sharp black teeth, and nothing else. It lacked eyes, a nose or ears. The mouths opened and closed spasmodically as the bat struggled to get free. Richter easily kept it contained in his grasp despite his new debuff.

*You have been afflicted with two strains of **Shadow Sickness!** -5% resistance to Dark and Shadow creatures. -5% resistance to Dark and Shadow magic! These are diseases. You will feel nauseous until this debuff is removed.*

“Ugh!” Richter huffed. He stared at the bat with renewed enmity, and callously took hold of the one wing that was flapping free. Casting about to make sure there weren’t any other shadow bats about to attack, he wrenched his hand down. The delicate bones in the bat’s wing broke as easily as an old toothpick. It made noise for the first time, all three of its mouths squealing.

Richter dropped it and watched it flap for a moment in his accelerated shadow time. Then his hand contorted into a familiar position and he spoke a word of Power, “*Igni!*” That was when he got his greatest shock of the day.

Nothing happened.

That wasn’t exactly true, because a notification did appear.

Know This! Fire magic does not work in the Shadow Realm.

Richter had never had his magic inhibited before. While the Ring of Shadow Shift had obvious advantages, it was not without danger. It seemed it opened him to attack by an entirely new form of monster. His Fire magic was also a no-go while he was here. That immediately made him wonder what else didn’t work. Blood was still flowing down his neck because hurting the bat had been more important to him than healing himself. Did Life magic work here?

If it didn’t, that seriously increased his danger while being in the Shadow Realm. He had come to rely upon his ability to heal almost any

injury in seconds. It gave him a faint sense of invulnerability. Richter had just begun to cast a healing spell when his time elapsed.

It was time to scream again.

“Aaaaggghhh!” he cried out as his knees buckled. Pain shot through his mind, unexpected and sudden. He managed to keep his feet, but that was only because he’d suffered worse agonies in recent months. Still, as pain went, this was way up there. Another bright red prompt appeared in his vision.

*You have exited the Shadow Realm without usage of a shadow. You have lost 100 HP and now suffer from the debuff **Shadow Shocked**. The resultant headache causes -75% to Concentration for the next 1 hour.*

“Damn it!” Richter shouted. “Damn it!”

Between the pain in his head and the pain in his neck, he was truly pissed off. And he’d gotten two debuffs in less than a minute. Richter tried to summon a healing spellform in his mind but even that made him feel like the room had flipped end-over-end. He did fall to his knees this time, and vomit spewed from his mouth and out over the floor.

Thankfully, Alma cast both *Weak Slow Heal* and *Minor Slow Heal* in succession. She also cast *Weak Cure Disease*, which removed the *Shadow Sickness* debuff. The pain in his head still sucked, but at least the wound in

his neck began to heal and the worst of the agony was blunted. Why the fuck didn't these magic rings come with a manual? Something simple like, "Make sure you're in a shadow when time runs out, or your entire body will feel like a rectum after taco hell!"

One thing was clear, he needed to talk to Hisako or Randolphus about the ring and the Shadow Realm. He was sure one, if not both, of them would have some info about it. His arm had been able to pass right through Alma but it seemed he couldn't phase through everything. Clearly there were limits or he would have sunk right through the earth, a fact that every scifi episode where you were out of phase didn't seem to take into account. Why wouldn't you just sink right through the Enterprise? Of course, then you would be in space, outside of the artificial gravity field so you might just float there, but still, it was a major plot hole!

Richter shook his head. He couldn't go down that particular rabbit hole again. Way too many hours had been spent on forums arguing about it. Besides, that was just a game, this was real life. He was sure there was a logical explanation for how it worked. Whatever the reason, the ability to phase through enemies in battle was huge. Almost as game-changing as being able to effectively disappear from one place and reappear in another. That was why, despite the Captain Jerry's-size hangover he was dealing with right now, he left the Ring of Shadow Shift on his finger. It was worth the

risk. Now, whether the ring was worth the judgmental glances he was sure to get from Randy and Hisako once they found out he was “playing with unknown magic” again... well, that remained to be seen.

Alma assessed him and a second later a golden glow surrounded her body as she cast *Weak Cure Disease*. Richter immediately felt a bit better.

*1 of the 2 of the disease strains of your **Shadow Sickness** has been cured!*

*The other is resistant to the Life magic that has been cast. You remain **Diseased!***

The dragonling started peppering him with questions, but he just thanked her and waved her away, responding, “It’s too sad to talk about.” Then he looked around the chamber again and made a decision. “I want you to go back to the kindir village. Tell Caulder that we won and tell the kindir that the undead won’t be attacking again, at least not in a concerted way. The whole settlement is probably in a panic right about now. I’ll follow behind as soon as I’m done here.”

Are you sure, master? You’re still diseased

I’ll take care of that, love, and I am sure. Now off you go.

Alma extended her neck and licked his face in farewell. As the dragonling flew out of the room, Richter looked around. He studied the chamber that only minutes ago had held a creature that had filled him with

dread. This room had not long ago been a place that might have been the scene of his final death; now he felt no danger. The change was surreal. His neck twinged once again, not completely healed. He was still suffering from *Shadow Shock* and so couldn't cast, but he decided sending to let Caulder know what was happening was still worth the risk of being alone.

Richter quickly sorted his rings and decided what to use from Nien's corpse. His Ring of Hidden Dangers finally went the way of Old Yeller, replaced by the goblin witch doctor's Ring of Mana, increasing his pool by +48. His new Glimmer Ring went into the bag as well. His own Perception was already fairly high, and it only worked when someone was close to him. Richter rubbed his neck thinking about how it hadn't helped him against the fast-flying shadow bat. He decided the +82 from the *unusual* class Ring of Health would serve him much better.

He looked at the rings he now wore.

Ring of Health	Durability: 19/19 Item Class: Scarce Item Quality: Exquisite Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +82 Health

Ring of Flowing Thought	Durability: 25/25 Item Class: Rare Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +20% mana regeneration
Ring of Spell Storage	Durability: 10/10 Item Class: Uncommon Item Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 0.01 kg Traits: Holds one spell that can be cast upon activating the ring. This Ring can hold one Novice Level Spell. Spell will only last one day before degrading. Spell equipped: None.
Ring of Mana	Durability: 19/24 Item Class: Unusual Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +48 Mana

Ring of Health	Durability: 21/23 Item Class: Unusual Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: +72 Health
Ring of Enchantment Resistance	Durability: 10/10 Item Class: Scarce Quality: Exquisite Weight: 0.01 kg Traits: +32% Resistance to enchantment-type spells
Ring of Shadow Shift	Durability: 25/25 Item Class: Scarce Item Quality: Superb Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Allows the wearer to shift into the Shadow Dimension for five seconds real time
Summoner's Ring	Durability: 22/116 Item Class: Rare

	Item Quality: Masterwork
	Weight: 0.01 kg
	Traits: Increases level of summoned creatures by +5

The rainbow of colors meant he was well equipped, but also that he'd be a big fat target for any other high-level contender. "Power begets power." It definitely seemed true that the stronger he got, the stronger he needed to be. Unfortunately, simply giving up wasn't an option, so he needed to keep growing as fast as possible and hope that it was enough.

As great as the magic rings the ghaſt had worn were, they ſtill didn't explain the actions of the ghosť king. Richter checked the remaining items on the ghast, including the contents of his pouches.

He didn't find any gold, but one of the bags did contain two topaz, a ſmall ruby and a larger emerald. The next pouch had an even better haul, depending on how you looked at it.

You have found:	Durability: 10/10
Weak Soul Stone x 5	Item Class: Common
	Stone Level: Weak
	Soul Level: Weak

	Status: Filled Weight: 0.1 kg
You have found: Basic Soul Stone x 4	Durability: 15/15 Item Class: Common Stone Level: Basic Soul Level: Basic Status: Filled Weight: 0.2 kg
You have found: Common Soul Stone x 5	Durability: 20/20 Item Class: Common Stone Level: Common Soul Level: Common Status: Filled Weight: 0.3 kg
You have found: Luminous Soul Stone x 2	Durability: 25/25 Item Class: Uncommon Stone Level: Luminous Soul Level: Luminous

	Status: Filled Weight: 0.4 kg
You have found: Brilliant Soul Stone x 1	Durability: 30/30 Item Class: Unusual Stone Level: Brilliant Soul Level: Brilliant Status: Filled Weight: 0.5 kg

The lower level stones were nothing to him. They were a-dime-a-dozen and had most likely been gained by killing animals. *Luminous* and *Brilliant* Level souls were powerful though, and could help him make very strong enchantments.

The third pouch held the key to the kindir king's quest.

Upon opening it, he found a large silver ring with a square-cut amethyst. The band was an inch wide, though the hole was only large enough to accommodate Richter's pinky. As soon as he touched it, a prompt appeared.

Quest Update: **Lord of the Sepulcher**

You have found the signet ring of the Lord of the Sepulcher. You are now given a choice. You may don the ring to force the power of this Sepulcher to obey you. Undead will be created periodically that can be used as soldiers in your armies. Your enemies will learn why in days of old, those who opposed the Mists feared the clack of bones. Or... you may choose another path, and try to lay these spirits to rest.

Being honest with himself, Richter was tired. Simply taking the power was appealing. If the prompt was right, and they almost always were, he had just found a way to spawn obedient skeletons. And not just any skeletons, but bodaks. Strong undead soldiers that could retain their Professions and utilize magical attacks. His enemies were mounting, and he needed to protect his people. Could he really let go of such a powerful weapon? Didn't he owe it to his people, some of whom had already lost so much, to take advantage of any opportunity that he could?

The arguments were all quite good. All supremely logical, yet... something in him rebelled. He'd never been one to take the path of least resistance. And if his village was going to mean anything, he didn't want to build it upon the eternal suffering of others. Again, only a moron built his house on an old Indian burial ground. Seeing as how he wasn't a *complete*

idiot, he got to work.

Richter looked at the ring again, but no further prompts appeared. So, he studied it in depth. The etchings on the outside were similar to what he had seen in the tunnels, scenes of kindir performing acts great and small. What was fascinating was that as he continued to turn the ring around to see the other side, the metal writhed under his fingers. When he looked again, the first side had changed to show a new scene. As he continued to turn the band, the etchings continued to shift.

The silver loop flew faster and faster in his fingers, faster than he should have been able to turn it. As the ring spun, the stories of the kindir that had lived in the mists were carried into Richter's mind. He wasn't just seeing engravings anymore; the figures had come alive and were acting out scenes from the past. He saw days long gone, of kindir who were both brave and craven. He saw the village, *his* village, with towering spires, and then saw it brought to ruin, the occupants who had once been kings coming to live in a manner barely better than beasts. He witnessed the lives of hundreds of generations, experiencing and forgetting lifetimes in a moment. The stories passed through his mind faster than he could consciously process and he remembered almost no specifics, but each story left a miniscule amount of residual energy upon him.

Then he saw the forging of the very ring he held, and the flow of

stories slowed enough for him to remember them. He saw a kindir clad in the raiment of nobility and saw that same king kneel before the emperor of the mists. Mists that spread for hundreds of miles in every direction. The king swore allegiance to the mists for eternity. The emperor, whose words could change the very direction of the winds, placed his hand on the shoulder of the kindir who had flecks of gold in his eyes, and spoke a name.

A name which Richter repeated now, "Cody, son of Neil."

As soon as the utterance left his lips, the king's spirit stood again. It rushed down the two tiers of the dais and stood before him. It looked at Richter again with naked emotion in its spectral eyes. Hope.

Looking at the spirit, Richter nodded to it in sympathy and understanding. He now knew why it had been captive in this sepulcher for millennia. It had been fulfilling an oath, an oath made to the lord of the mists. An oath that Richter could now negate as the new Lord Mist. With a consummate sense of rightness, he finished his pronouncement, "I release you."

A look of profound relief and peace crossed the kindir's face. The ancient spirit even quirked its mouth as the barest hint of the playfulness the king had had in life returned. Then it pointed its hand at the ring Richter held; a stream of energy flowed from its body into the purple jewel atop the

silver ring. The kindir's ethereal body grew less substantial as energy flowed out of it, but the flow stopped before the ghost disappeared entirely. Despite the fact that the spirit was now easier to see through, it also had more personality than before. What had been the hint of a smirk was now a full-fledged smile.

With an almost jaunty bow, it paid respect to the Lord of the Mist Village. While still bent over, its body began to blow away on a wind that the chaos seed couldn't feel. He heard something right before the king completely vanished, however, that sounded like a ghostly whisper, "For the Missst."

Congratulations! You have completed the Quest: **Lord of the Sepulcher**

You have done it! You have released the spirit of the last kindir king of these lands. In thanks, it has transferred its control of the Sepulcher of Verget Kunig to the keeper of the Signet of Verget Kunig. The possessor of this signet ring can now:

- 1) Control and Command the undead created by this sepulcher;
- 2) Create new undead. The sepulcher will make **10 Summoning Points** per day that can be used to summon undead;
- 3) Assign a kindir noble to serve under you to administer this location. This will bond the noble to you and greatly increase your

relationship with him and his settlement.

Reward: Though you do not remember what you have seen, experiencing the lives of countless kindir has changed you on a fundamental level.

Kindir now like you instinctually. +20,000 Relationship Points with any kindir of the Verget Kunig hamlet. +10,000 Relationship Points with any other kindir.

Reward: 6,250 (base 5,000 x 1.25) experience points

Do you wish to take command of the **Sepulcher of Verget Kunig** at this time? *Yes or No?*

Richter knew he was just asking for another lecture from Hisako, but this time he wasn't playing with new magic. He couldn't afford to let someone else take command of the sepulcher if he didn't. He chose "Yes."

Quest Update: **Helping Hand I**

You have removed the undead threat. Return to the Kindir settlement to gain your reward.

Despite the massive headache *Shadow Shock* was causing him, a faint smile found its way onto his face. He'd cleared the nest. Now he just had to

make it back to Verget Kunig and recover from the consequences of his Shadow magic experimentation. *Shadow Shock* wasn't something he could do anything about, and one of the diseases he'd gotten from the bat bite had resisted Alma's magic, but thankfully, that wasn't his only option.

Richter reached into his bag and downed a Cure Disease potion that Tabia had made for him. He thanked his own doomsday prepper mentality for always planning ahead. The green solution might have tasted like crème de menthe mixed with chicken grease, but it got the job done.

*The remaining strain of your **Shadow Sickness** has been cured! You are no longer **Diseased**!*

He looked at the bottle in appreciation thinking that he absolutely had to get his Alchemist to make more. The fact that the potion had worked when Alma's magic hadn't raised another topic to his mind, though. He'd been thinking of his magic and potions as different mechanisms to cause the same effects, but the *Shadow Sickness* had proved that wasn't true. Maybe the Life magic he and Alma had access to just wasn't strong enough to kill the second disease, but his dragonling was a powerful caster. Not only did she get the 50% bonus to her Life magic spellpower from him, but her high Intelligence gave her magic a boost as well.

Assuming the problem wasn't the strength of her magic, it raised the

possibility that it had been a case of needing the right tool for the right job. Had the second disease actually had resistance to Life magic, like bacteria back on Earth were resistant to certain antibiotics? He'd already seen that his enchantments were stronger or weaker than spells in some ways. Maybe the second strain was resistant to magic, but not the potion. That thought made him a bit uncomfortable as he'd come to rely on his magic so heavily.

A moment later, Richter pushed that aside. All it meant was that he had to keep training and growing stronger. It was becoming increasingly clear that there wasn't just one right way to do things in The Land, and there wasn't just one "best" pathway to power. In that moment, he knew that if he wanted to become a true powerhouse, he'd have to keep growing in many different directions. That was exactly what he was going to do.

Those were ideas for later, though. For now, he was just happy that the nausea was fading. The headache still sucked, but hopefully it would fade when the *Shadow Shock* debuff elapsed. In the meantime, he put the signet ring into his bag; he had definite plans for it. As soon as he'd seen that he could choose a kindir to administer it, the gears in his mind started turning. He couldn't wait to get back to the settlement, but first, he searched the rest of the throne room. Sure enough, there was a hidden compartment behind the throne and it wasn't even boobytrapped. It took half an hour to find, but it was worth it. When Richter finally left the dungeon, he was richer

by one hundred and forty-eight gold, a decapitated body and the head of a ghast.

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Leaving the dungeon was considerably easier than fighting all the way to the end. Even the feel of the place had changed. He was still in a silent tomb, but the entire ominous vibe was gone. In no time at all, he was back at the entrance of the sepulcher. The *Shadow Shock* debuff was still a major pain in the ass, and he got dizzy if he moved too quickly, but it wasn't debilitating if he took his time.

There was a slight problem when he got back to the collapsed tunnel that led outside. He'd been carrying Nien's body, an extremely gross act. The corpse smelled like week-old Arby. Not the restaurant, but his uncle Arby the shut-in, after he hadn't bathed for a week. He'd still managed to haul the body all the way to the end of the dungeon, but climbing a rope while carrying it was just not going to work, not debuffed as he was. Summoning a mist worker would have been great, but he still couldn't concentrate enough to cast. Richter considered several solutions, but

ultimately decided to just go full gross.

The chaos seed tied the severed head to his belt using thick strands of its greasy, nasty hair. Then he tied the rest of the ghaſt's body to the end of one of the ſecured ropes. He ſtarted to climb. When he got to the top, he was not all that ſurprised to ſee a familiar face waiting for him.

“My lord,” Caulder greeted him with a broad ſmile on his face. His gaze took in the ſevered head attached to his liege's waſt, “I ſee you have been making new friends.”

“Sergeant,” Richter greeted him with a pained ſmile. The light filtering through the trees hurt his eyes. “I thought I told you to go to the kindir hamlet.”

“That you did, my lord, and I followed your orders. Your dragonling told us about your mighty victory though, ſo I decided to come wait for you, knowing how much you hate to walk through a dangerous forest all by your lonesome.” The man's ſmile was abſolutely ſhit-eating at that point. Richter was pretty ſure he'd have gotten a high five and maybe even an aſs ſlap if they'd been back on Earth. All Caulder ſaid though was, “Well done, my lord!”

Richter got caught up in the man's good cheer deſpite his maſſive headache, “He was a tough baſtard, but I got him.”

“I was pleased and surprised to find that your familiar can talk now, as well. It was always a bit odd to hear her voice inside my head.”

“After a while, you might regret it,” Richter responded with a faint smile. Alma had many opinions about many things and loved sharing them.

His grin was interrupted by a blast of air in his right ear.

“Gah!” he exclaimed, while he swatted at his feisty familiar. She trumpeted her clear superiority as she flew high above his head. Richter fixed Caulder with a “why didn’t you warn me she was there, man” look and the sergeant chuckled in response.

“Ready, my lord?” the guard asked.

“Just one more thing,” his lord replied. “Help me with this.” He started hauling up the rope. Caulder grabbed a length as well with a puzzled look on his face and did as he was bid. Richter definitely could have brought the body up on his own, but hangovers and *Shadow Shock* debuffs had a way of making you want to fuck with your friends. Besides, he was pretty sure that Caulder had known Alma was going to sneak attack him. It was immensely satisfying when, with a final strong heave, the corpse flew into the air a bit and landed at the sergeant’s feet with a wet *shlap*.

“Blech!” escaped the guard’s mouth before he could control his reaction.

“Nowwww I’m ready to go,” Richter said with a laugh, before he winced at the volume of his own voice. With a pained expression, he asked Alma to summon a mist worker to carry the body.

With Richter’s war badge *Movement Speed III*, they made it back to the kindir hamlet in no time at all. The two men would have made even better time had they not been slowed by the mist worker. As they entered the hidden glade, a resounding cheer rose up from the kindir and his uninjured guards. Many of them clapped him on the back, and the three elders had open smiles on their faces. Two foul-smelling kindir, who after a moment Richter identified as the pair he had freed from the ghaſt’s cage, fell to their knees and hugged his legs. They wailed their appreciation, and Richter gained prompts saying that he had gained over a hundred thousand Relationship Points with the two of them, increasing their relationship all the way to *ally*.

Richter immediately searched out the three members of his warband that had been seriously injured. The man that had lost an eye was unconscious. The kindir told him they had given his guard a powerful sedative to help with the pain, and he had been asleep since then. The other two looked at him with pain on their faces, but they both had smiles. Richter quickly realized that it had something to do with the fact that as members of his warband they had gotten a large chunk of experience from him finishing

the *Lord of the Sepulcher* quest. The three injured men had been too far away to share in the experience gained from grinding through the Lair, as they'd been outside of his War Leader Sphere of Influence. Both had leveled up from their share of the quest XP, however.

They assured Richter they were fine. He told them that they would be returning to the village soon. He intended to use his settlement spell, *Dungeon Transport*, to get the whole party back to the village all at once. Whether he'd be able to do that with the *Shadow Shock* debuff remained to be seen. If they had to wait until the one hour timer elapsed though, so be it. It was a much safer option than traipsing back through the forest. The sun was close to setting now, and Richter didn't like being in the forest at night even at full strength.

He took the time to reach into his Bag of Holding and pull out a handful of coins. He put a gold crown into the hands of every one of his party members. The smiles of his men grew even wider, and he heard more than one speak about his generosity after he'd started walking away. If there was one mistake he wouldn't make, it was letting his people feel unappreciated. Loyalty was more valuable than gold.

The chaos seed was escorted back into the largest house by the three elders, who continued to praise him. Richter saw broad smiles on the faces of all the kindir that looked at him, in fact. He wasn't sure if it was just

because he'd removed the undead threat or if the +20,000 Relationship Points he'd gained as a quest reward had just upped their opinion of him. Most of the kindir had been of the *friendly* relationship rank before the quest, but as he Analyzed more and more of them now they were all *steadfast*, a full five relationship ranks higher.

Once Richter opened the door to the main building and walked inside, he was immediately ushered to the large table. Food and drink were brought to him, which he balked at until he was assured that his people were being taken care of as well. That was all he needed to hear. Adventuring all day had given him a fierce hunger. For the next short while all that mattered to Richter was stuffing his face.

He let out a loud burp when he was done. It escaped before he knew what was happening, but good god, did it feel great! Rather than be offended, two of the elders, Flitwalker and Glintgrabber, let out belches of their own. Jewel let loose as well, but hers was from below... and Richter chose to believe it was a fart.

With a broad smile on his face, Flitwalker stood and raised a mug of ale in salute, "You were as good as your word, Lord Richter. Not only did you return two of our own after they had been captured by the undead, but you slew our enemy. The body of the ghast is proof of your deeds. We are in your debt!"

Congratulations! You have completed a Quest: **Helping Hand I**

You have removed the undead threat that imperiled the kindir hamlet, Verget Kunig. The elders know nothing about the forgotten history of the Sepulcher of Verget Kunig. It is your choice whether to reveal this information. Whatever you decide, you have earned your rewards!

Reward: The secret of the kindirs' immunity to the mists

Reward: 12,500 (base 10,000 x 1.25) experience points

Reward: +25,000 personal Relationship Points with the kindir of Verget Kunig.

Reward: +30,000 settlement Relationship Points of the Kindir Hamlet of Verget Kunig towards the Mist Village. Total Relationship Points:

+52,813

*Congratulations! The Relationship of the Kindir Hamlet and the Mist Village has improved from **Steadfast (+20,000)** to **Trusted (+35,000)**. “We trust your people to adhere to your word and feel comfortable placing our faith in you.”*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 7 and 8 in **Diplomacy**. +8% to negotiating power. +8% more likely that representatives from other*

settlements will take both threats and offers seriously.

*You have completed the quest of another settlement. As leader of your own settlement, you have earned Diplomacy Points! The **Mist Village** has received **+100 Diplomacy Points** in regard to the kindir hamlet **Verget Kunig**.*

*Lack of a **Townhall** causes complete loss of any gained Diplomacy Points.*

Current Diplomacy Points (Mist Village → Verget Kunig): 0

Richter gritted his teeth again at the waste. He decided to take the time to change his settings so he wouldn't get the Diplomacy Point prompts until he had a Townhall. Seeing what he was missing out on over and over was really starting to piss him off. With that done, he focused on the awesome boost he'd just gained to both his personal and settlement relationships. The only reason he had the wood sprites as allies and trading partners was because he had done things to improve his relationship with them. The only reason Sion, Terrod and so many others were willing to fight and die for him on a daily basis was because of his relationship with them. Anyone who ignored that facet of The Land would have to be amazingly strong by themselves, or sooner or later they'd end up dead.

The quest experience did not hurt either, but the real prize of all of this was that he was finally about to learn how to plug the hole in his

security. The mists were all that kept his small village safe from its enemies. Enemies far more numerous and accustomed to war than his people. The Mist Village would one day be a powerhouse, of that Richter had no doubt, but they needed time.

Seeing the intent look on Richter's face, Flit wasted no more time. He reached under the table and brought out a wooden box. It was closed with a simple metal latch, and when he opened it, he revealed a small jar, a piece of paper and three plants.

“This is the secret to our immunity, Lord Richter. It is a salve that must be applied under the eyes. It removes the magical effects of the mists and lets you see as if they were not there. The Recipe is written here and these are the three herbs that are needed to make it.”

Richter shook his head in bemusement. The unadorned box before him was smaller than a loaf of bread. The wood was rough and there was a stain marking one corner like a drink had been spilled on it and carelessly cleaned up. It was crazy to think that this small, innocuous box had something in it that could mean the death of every member of his village.

It was only the magic of his Place of Power that kept them safe from enemies that were popping up all around them. Goblins and trolls to the east, bugbears to the south, and bigoted nobles to the west. There were even

thousands upon thousands of little lizard fuckers living in the ground beneath their feet, and some of them had a real hard-on for him. Hell, the only reason he didn't have enemies to the north was probably because that was the one direction he'd hadn't yet gone. Everywhere he went, his rising power invited challenge. Seeing that the primary defense of his people could be overcome by a mere salve, and not even one that looked hard to create, made his heart drop.

He shook his head. The chaos seed just needed to pray that his enemies never found out about this. Richter examined each item in turn.

You have found:	Alchemy Class: Uncommon
Mist Vision	Alchemy Level: Solution
Salve	Alchemy Strength: Enhanced
	Durability: 6/6
	Weight: 0.4 kg
	Traits: When applied beneath the eyes, gives immunity to the sight-confusing properties of the mists of Kirimuratq for 115 feet from your position, for 3 hours and 27 minutes.
	Doses: 3/5

The first thing that jumped out at him was the word “Kirimuratq.” The last time he had seen it was on the activation key for the Dark portal that led to the lich’s domain. The word was a melding of two ancient words, “home” and “vapor.” Put together, they were how the Mist Village was denoted in runic script. The fact that the word was used in the description could mean that the Recipe was incredibly old.

The next thing that occurred to him was that the effect of the potion was extremely specific, most likely due to the level and strength of this particular potion and the alchemist that had prepared it. The fact that it didn’t last all day was good, as was the fact that it only revealed a hundred and fifteen feet from the wearer’s position. That at least gave his people a chance to stage ambushes if a hostile army approached his lands.

Richter picked up the piece of paper next.

<p>You have found: Recipe: <i>Mist Salve</i></p>	<p>Item Class: Common Durability: 3/4 Weight: 0.03 Ingredients: 2 Mist Roots + 1 Dark Briar Thorn + 1 Four Leaf Process: ...</p>
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The paper also had instructions on how to specifically prepare the salve. The good news was that certain steps needed to be followed that couldn't be guessed. It looked like it took about four hours to create at baseline. The first half of the potion had to be prepared with sunlight shining on it, whereas the second half had to be finished in darkness. The pestle also needed to be dipped in pure water at 25%, 50% and 75% of the way through the process. It would be almost impossible to figure it out by accident. That was the good news.

The bad news was that if you knew the process and ingredients, it only required a mortar and pestle to create the salve. The Recipe didn't need any of the advanced alchemical equipment that higher level Recipes required. If his enemies ever found out about the process, the village would have to rely on conventional defenses. His people were growing stronger, but most of them hadn't even held a blade or shield a mere two months ago. The sprites were trained fighters and imbue arrow was powerful, but an army needed more than ranged fighters. The average level of his villagers was around twelve or below. It was nothing to sneeze at, but combat was one of the most reliable ways to gain experience. If they went up against professional fighters, they would probably be outclassed in regard to both levels and combat expertise. The Mist Village was dangerous, but their attacks had succeeded by virtue of stealth, magic and superior weaponry.

They needed time to shore up their defenses. They needed the mists.

The other bad news was that the dark briar thorn and four leaf were *common* ingredients. They could be found anywhere in the forest. Richter had seen them plenty of times before, though he had had no idea then, of course, that they could be used for this purpose. The mist root was something that Richter hadn't heard of before, but his Herb Lore skill showed him that it was only *uncommon* in rarity. It wasn't everywhere, but it also wouldn't be overly hard to find. Even worse, when he looked at the green stalks and yellow flowers on top of the root, his Herb Lore skill identified it by another name, a name he was well familiar with.

You have found:	Herb Class: Common
Yellow	Weight: 0.01 kg
Primdale	Uses: <i>Novice:</i> Component of a pain relief potion <i>Initiate:</i> A yellow dye that might make people like you more <i>Apprentice:</i> Component of a medium-strength glue

While he hadn't been familiar with "mist root," Richter had seen yellow primdale plenty of times. The damn flower was growing in the

village garden! Isabella was cultivating it because of its multiple uses and because she liked yellow dresses. What was strange was that when he looked at the roots of the plant, a different prompt appeared.

<p>You have found:</p> <p>Mist Root</p>	<p>Herb Class: Uncommon</p> <p>Weight: 0.01 kg</p> <p>Uses:</p> <p><i>Novice:</i> Threads treated with this can be used to create a Mist Cloak</p> <p><i>Initiate:</i> Component of a recipe to give sight immunity to the mists of Kirimuratq</p> <p><i>Apprentice:</i> Can create a tea to deepen the connection of the Master of the Mist Village with his domain</p>
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Richter obviously knew that different parts of a plant could be used for different purposes. This was the first time he'd seen different classifications for different parts of the same plant though. He had several questions about the various uses of mist root, but his first was, "Why is the top of the plant registering as *common*, but the bottom is showing as *uncommon*? I've personally picked primdale. The roots always just look like simple brown tubers. They didn't have silvery threads like this plant does,"

he stated, pointing at the plant before him.

“Jewel is our herbalist,” Flit responded. “She is the best person to answer.”

“And I would have already if you hadn’t interrupted,” the cantankerous woman snapped. When she turned her face towards Richter though, she was all gap-toothed smile. “Some herbs must be picked in a specific way to unlock their hidden properties. To manifest the mist root, yellow primdale must be picked at night by the light of either Aquiel or Caelean.”

Richter nodded, both fascinated and annoyed at once. Every time he thought he was getting a handle on how things worked in The Land, one more detail popped up to show how very little he actually knew. It had never occurred to him to harvest his herbs in different ways in order to unlock their full potential. On the upside, it did place one more roadblock in the way of anyone trying to make the salve. There were seven moons orbiting The Land, and picking a specific herb by the light of either the Water or the Air moon was extremely unlikely to just happen by mistake. What kind of weirdo picked plants at night anyway?

“I appreciate you sharing this with me. Now I need to ask you for something else. I know that it wasn’t part of our original deal, but would you

agree to not share this recipe with anyone else?” Richter asked.

Flit didn’t hesitate to speak, “For such a wonderful and trustworthy friend, we are happy to agree. We would not do anything to risk your safety. As you know, our settlement is a waystation as much as a home. As more kindir come, we will tell them of your great deeds and ensure that they also know the importance of keeping this secret.”

Richter nodded in relief. Flit’s specific verbiage didn’t escape his notice. The *trusted* status between the kindirs’ settlement and his own was already paying off. Then another less warm and fuzzy thought occurred to him. “How many of your people know how to make this salve?”

“All of them,” Jewel replied brightly and with pride. “When the mists returned, I remembered the old tales my gammy told me. She made it clear that every kindir passing through Verget Kunig should know how to make it themselves in case they ran out. So that is what I did!”

“Sooo, you’re saying there are kindir who have already left the hamlet, have no idea they should keep the mist salve a secret, *and* know everything required to create it?” Richter’s voice rose slightly with each point he made.

The three elders looked at each other, comprehension dawning, “Ahh, yes,” Flit replied slowly, “but as Shinecatcher has already shown you, we do

not give our secrets away to just anyone!”

Richter remembered his first conversation with the gabby kindir. Shinecatcher might not have explicitly given the secret of the salve away, but he had let Richter know that his immunity to the mists had something to do with a potion within the first thirty minutes of them knowing each other. That memory did not exactly fill Richter with confidence. The kindir could be crafty, but they could also be ditsy nutterbutters.

“Uh huh,” the chaos seed finally responded dubiously. “Is there any way to contact them? The kindir who have already left?”

“No,” Flit responded regretfully, but then his face brightened, “Only fifty or so kindir have left since the mists appeared though!”

“Uh huh,” Richter responded again, his heart dropping. Suddenly, he felt the need to increase the height of the village walls ASAP. Shaking his head, he realized that he couldn’t do anything about that at the moment. He had to focus on what he could control. Now that there was another nearby friendly settlement, within the domain of his village no less, there were new opportunities. “Well, I’m happy that we could help you with your problem. Please feel free to call on us again if you have need.”

“Is that a formal offer of protection?” Glintgrabber asked quickly. There was an intensity to the gazes of all three elders now.

“What?” Richter asked. He was caught off guard by the seriousness that had suddenly appeared in the conversation. That wasn’t a feeling he normally associated with the jokey kindir.

“Is that a formal offer of protection?” Glint repeated. “If it is, in the manner that a liege lord would extend to a vassal, then unfortunately I must tell you that our relationship simply hasn’t progressed to that level yet. You have done much for the people of Verget Kunig, and while some of us may like you personally quite a bit, even enough to be loyal to you, the relationship between our two settlements just isn’t strong enough yet. Is there anything else you might be able to offer us to make us feel comfortable with your proposal?” The other two elders looked at the chaos seed with grins on their faces and Jewel even waggled an eyebrow.

Richter blinked in shock when he realized exactly what was happening. These three bastards were looking for a bribe! He wasn’t even sure what they were offering in return for the graft, but hadn’t he just saved their people from a horrible death? How was that not enough? The chaos seed was starting to get why in some countries these crafty bastards were shot on sight!

He took a deep breath and forced himself to be calm. He had to think about this like a ruler and not just like a man that wanted to flip the table over. His relationship with the wood sprites of the Hearth Tree had paid

insanely massive dividends that he hadn't foreseen at the time. It was entirely possible that his relationship with the kindir of Verget Kunig could do the same. Besides, he'd been meaning to either give or barter this to the kindir anyway.

Forcing a congenial tone, Richter pulled out the Blueprint he'd found. "I actually did find something interesting while we were in the dungeon." He placed it on the table and turned it around so they could see it.

The three elders immediately began 'oohing' and 'aahing' over the item, then Flit looked up and asked, "This is a gift from your people to ours, yes?"

"Of course," Richter replied, with a smile only partially ruined by the fact that he was speaking through gritted teeth. As annoying as the three old fogies were being, the chaos seed just had a feeling that this would be worth it.

You have given an extravagant gift to the kindir of Verget Kunig that is specifically tailored to benefit their people. All relationship bonuses doubled for such an appropriate gift.

+4,180 (base +2,090 x 2) settlement Relationship Points of the Kindir Hamlet of Verget Kunig towards the Mist Village. Total Relationship Points:

+56,993

*Congratulations! The Relationship of the Kindir Hamlet and the Mist Village has improved from **Trusted (+35,000)** to **Loyal (+55,000)**. “We will stand by you through good times and bad. May our friendship be everlasting. May our enemies fear our might.”*

*Know This! The relationship of your village with a Minor Tribe, the Hamlet of Verget Kunig, has progressed to the rank of **Loyalty**. You may now adopt them as a **Vassal State**.*

What? What! Richter thought again, feeling complete shock. Before he could even say anything, Flit stood. All joviality was gone from his voice as he swept into a formal bow. When he rose, he looked Richter squarely in the eye, “We kindir are a people of curiosity, who love adventure and cheer. We travel through many lands and can bring you news of what we hear. Though we are not known as warriors, we will fight fiercely for our own and can bring a variety of skills to bear. If you will have us, we would swear to be your vassal in exchange for your protection and aid.”

Richter heard a sound like the blaring of three trumpets when the next prompt appeared.

Bwaaa-Bwa-Bwaaa

*A Minor Tribe, **Verget Kunig**, has offered to become your vassal. If you accept their pledge, you will promise to protect them and offer aid as*

needed. In return, the Mist Village will benefit from the standard and unique perks of having a Vassal State.

*Know This! All rewards **doubled** and all penalties are **halved** for having the Vassal State within the domain of your settlement.*

*The specific perks of a **Level 1 Vassal State Relationship** with the Minor Tribe of Verget Kunig are as follows:*

- 1) Unique Perk of Verget Kunig: +4 (base +2) Luck for every citizen of the Mist Village*
- 2) +10% **Morale** and **Loyalty** (base +5%): Having another settlement as vassal will fill your people with happiness and pride*
- 3) +10% **Commerce** (base +5%): The kindir travel far and wide and will bring items to trade from time to time*
- 4) Random boosts in **Diplomacy Points** with regards to other settlements dependent on the gossip and news the people of Verget Kunig bring back from other realms*
- 5) +250 **Crime Points** (base +500 Crime Points) in light of the kindir's propensity to "acquire" new objects*
- 6) Taxes may be levied against your new vassals, though this may decrease your relationship and lead to future problems*

Those perks were awesome! Richter had been right that improving his relationship with the kindir might pay dividends. Increasing the Luck of

everyone in the village was amazing, but the other perks were great too. The boost in Morale would be more than welcome, and though he hadn't dived into understanding the Commerce City Mechanic yet, the mere fact that the kindir would come with items to trade was outstanding.

The fact that the sticky-fingered kindir would up the Crime in his settlement wasn't great, but at least the penalty was halved. He also still had a pretty good Corruption rank. His village being *decent* reduced Crime by 30%. That meant even with the +250 Crime Points, his village would still keep the same *negligible* rank that it had now. He wasn't looking forward to the day that the Mist Village accumulated five hundred crime points and reached rank two, *petty* crime.

Reading the prompt again, it just seemed like accepting the kindir as a Vassal State would be a win-win all around. He could even levy taxes against them, though he'd obviously need Randy to guide him on exactly how that was done. Richter couldn't see a valid reason to refuse the offer. Then he read the next prompts.

Know This! The liege-vassal relationship begins at Level 1 and may progress as the relationship evolves. Current Vassal Points with Verget Kunig: 0/1,000.

Know This! Your lack of a Townhall creates a problem in maintaining a

vassal. Construct a functioning Townhall within 7 days or risk losing your vassal.

Know This! The current Morale, Loyalty, Health and other City Dynamic factors are unknown to you due to your lack of a Townhall. Ignoring these factors could lead to revolt, sabotage, plague or other calamitous events. Nurturing these elements could lead to spontaneous gifts, undying loyalty, major boosts to the growth of your Vassal State or other wonderful eventualities. Once a Townhall is created, assign a Diplomat to increase the relationship of your Vassal State towards the Mist Village and to obtain more up-to-date statistics regarding Verget Kunig's City Dynamics.

As soon as he saw the word “revolt” every bloody war he’d ever learned about in history class came crashing to the front of his mind. A civil war or guerrillas waging battles against government had always seemed like anecdotal stories to him. After the Western Confederation had triumphed in WWIII, there had been global stability. Thinking about revolts was like thinking about the Dark Ages.

Richter looked at the smiling and expectant faces of the kindir and couldn’t imagine them carrying torches and pitchforks, but he’d seen stranger things since coming to The Land. One thing was clear: accepting the kindir as vassals was an actual responsibility that had major benefits, but potentially deadly consequences as well. He knew one thing. He wasn’t about to make

a serious decision like this without asking some questions.

“What would be specifically required of me if you became my vassal?” he asked.

“Right now, nothing more than what you have already done,” Flit assured him. “We will deal with any random attacks on our own. We are used to taking care of ourselves. If we come across another dungeon or enemy that is beyond us, however, then we will call upon you for aid. Your best effort in these tasks is all we would ever require. As of right now, we have no further needs.”

That all sounded good to Richter. In fact, it sounded like the kindir might be able to help him find monster dens before they evolved into nests or lairs. He also had a sneaking suspicion that having the kindir as vassals might turn them into a quest factory. Seeing as how there was no better way to get XP than to complete quests, he wanted to encourage that. Richter told Flit that he would always be interested in monster locations as well as hearing any needs they might have. The kindir seemed happy with Richter’s response so he moved onto the next question, “If you became my vassals, I would need a point man.” Seeing their confused expressions, he clarified, “I would need one person elected to be able to make decisions for all of Verget Kunig. Does Flit speak for the two of you?” This was addressed to the other two elders.

It was Jewel who responded, “We have been administering the needs of our hamlet as a council, but that has as much to do with drinking together as it does with need.” She let out a cackling laugh, once again revealing her five bedazzled teeth. “Truth be told, Flit does most of the work, and it has always been said that his family had royal blood in it.” Glintgrabber raised a mug of ale to signify his agreement.

“Now do not start spouting that old nonsense,” Flitwalker admonished the woman. “We haven’t had a king since the old hall was lost centuries ago. What Lord Richter needs to know is that we will stand by our word.” He looked the chaos seed in the eye again, and earnestly stated, “We will. The truth is, we need your help, my lord. The undead aren’t the only danger we have noticed. Stronger and stronger monsters have been seen prowling the lands around our hamlet. We have also seen bugbears, goblins and even kobolds and orcs pushing into regions that had not suffered their presence for many, many years. If you bring us under your protection, I would also feel comfortable letting a few other small settlements in the area know that you are a man to be trusted.”

Before Richter could ask, ‘what other settlements?’ another prompt appeared.

Know This! Flitwalker has promised to speak on your behalf to other Minor Tribes if you agree to accept his settlement as a Vassal State.

Richter's eyes widened. There were more Minor Tribes out there? And they were in the area? His mind immediately started racing. Verget Kunig was going to increase the Luck of everyone in his village and a host of other bonuses that seemed to reflect their wanderlust nature. What might a more militant or research-focused tribe add to his village?

As earnest as Flit was, Richter could also see a merry glint in the man's face now. The codgy old bastard knew he'd dangled a final carrot that the chaos seed couldn't help but chomp down on. Thinking about the connotations of that put a crimp in Richter's mood, but then he had a devilish thought of his own. Kindir seemed to love fun above all else except for maybe exploration. What would Flit hate more than responsibility?

To get a little bit of his own back, Richter put forward one stipulation. "As I said before, if I agree to this, then I will need one person to be in charge, not three. Do the three of you agree to make Flit formally in charge of the hamlet?"

Both Jewel and Glintgrabber shouted "Yes" at the same time that Flit shook his hands back and forth and shouted, "No!"

"It's settled then," Richter intoned with a tone of extreme satisfaction. Knocking the cocky old kindir off his game brought a merry cheer to his heart. "It's settled?" he repeated as a question while extending a

hand towards Flit.

The kindir looked back at him sourly for a moment, before a rueful grin crossed his face, “It is.” The two men clasped wrists, bound in agreement. Then Flit went down on one knee, and looked up at him expectantly.

*Do you accept the Minor Tribe, **Verget Kunig**, as a Vassal State of the Mist Village and Flitwalker as its ruler? Yes or No?*

Richter chose “Yes” and words appeared in his mind that he spoke right after. Just like when he accepted oaths of fealty, the words felt as if they were flowing through him and that they originated from something very powerful and very old. The air in the house grew heavy with portent.

“I, Richter, Master of the Mist Village, do extend to you an offer of vassalage. You and your people will come to my call, in war or in peace. You will act in the best interests of me, your liege, and never against me or mine. In return, your fields will be protected as my lands, your people will be protected as my blood, your lives will be as my very own. Do you accept this offer, Flitwalker of Verget Kunig?”

“I, Flitwalker, leader of Verget Kunig, do swear to make your enemies my enemies, and your friends my friends. My people are now your people, and our lands are your lands. We will serve you, Lord Mist, and may

The Land shake with the power of our steps.” Once Flit finished the words, the feeling of pressure vanished. Notifications appeared in Richter’s vision accompanied by the sound of trumpets again.

Bwaaa-Bwa-Bwaaa

*Congratulations! You have secured the vassalage of the Minor Tribe, **Verget Kunig**. You are no longer simply a tribal leader. You are now a Chief! You may now be known as Chief Richter, the first of your name. Long may you reign, Chief Richter I. Guard your throne well, for every lord must guard against dangers from within as well as without.*

*Know This! The Special Bonus of a new vassal is multiplied by 5x for one week: **Each member of the Mist Village has Luck +20 for the next week.***

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 9 in **Diplomacy**. +9% to negotiating power. +9% more likely that representatives from other settlements will take both threats and offers more seriously.*

Richter looked at the still-kneeling Flit with wide eyes. He didn’t even know where to start! The kindir looked back with a smile, his youthful face at odds with his grey hair. Another feeling of pressure entered the air. It was less severe than a moment ago, but apparently Flit wanted to make his own stance towards Richter clear, “My Chief! I formally swear allegiance and loyalty to you, Lord Richter, Lord of the Mist Village. From now, unto

my very death, I will protect you and your interests to the best of my ability and without deceit.”

The ritual words spilled from Richter’s lips in turn, “I accept your oath of fealty, and swear to honor your pledge with the same gravity in which it was given.” Then Richter pulled the kindir to his feet. “Let’s share the good news with everyone!”

Flit smiled in return. That smile turned sour when Jewel curtsied to him and Glintgrabber bowed. The mockery was evident on their faces. As Richter walked towards the door, flanked by the three elders, they had already fallen back into well-worn grooves of bickering. The sound brought a smile to the chaos seed’s face. Flit was in charge now, and that could go to a man’s head. That fate was far less likely though if you had old friends around to keep you grounded with a hug... or a kick in the ass, as needed.

Once they were outside, the faces of every kindir and every conscious member of Richter’s warband turned towards them. Flitwalker stepped forward and shouted, “After countless centuries, Verget Kunig is once again part of the Mist Chieftdom! Three cheers for Chief Mist!”

Everyone present cheered and threw their hands in the air. More than one kindir danced a jig, and more than one lass kissed a guard. Unbeknownst to the war party, more than one guard had some coins “liberated” in the

confusion, but they would later decide it was well worth it.

In the pandemonium, Richter reached into his Bag of Holding. He took the ring with the kindir signet ring out and concentrated. A prompt appeared.

Do you wish to grant Flitwalker the status of a kindir noble under your command? Yes or No?

He chose “Yes,” and immediately afterward, a window opened in the kindir’s vision as well.

A look of horror crossed the Flit’s face as the enormity of his new responsibilities sunk in. With sickly sweet satisfaction, Richter spoke, “That’s right, *subchief* Flitwalker. You’re a noble now, with all the duties that come with it. One of those duties is to supervise the administration of the Sepulcher of Verget Kunig. I expect you to show up at my village within the week to clarify with my Chamberlain exactly what taxation there will be. You will also be responsible for spawning skeletons to serve us. Half will stay here to guard your hamlet and the other half will be sent to supplement the forces of my village. It’s very important that you don’t share too many details about this with my village healer, Sumiko. There’s a good chance she’ll punch you in the nose if she finds out about what we’re going to be doing.

“I also want you to explore the sepulcher to see if there is any information you can gain about your past. I have a feeling it might be related to this old kindir hall you were talking about before. Ideally, you can compile a compendium of...”

As Richter kept talking, surrounded by the cheers of kindir, men, elves and sprites, Flitwalker’s face grew sadder and sadder.

CHAPTER 74 – Day 144 – Kuborn 34, 0 AoC



Fifteen minutes later, Richter was standing outside with his men. Flit had agreed to come to the village sometime in the next week. Thinking they had lost enough time, Richter ordered his group to gather around him, including the mist worker holding the ghaſt's body. He figured either Hisako or Beyan might want to take a look at the Death Knight's corpse, albeit for very different reasons.

Richter had rested with the kindir until the hour timer on the *Shadow Shock* debuff had elapsed. His headache was gone, thankfully, and casting spells was easy again. With a final nod towards the smiling kindir, Richter began to cast *Dungeon Transport*. Tendrils of mist roſe from the ground, wrapping around everyone within five yards of him. A map of the Nodes he'd found ſo far appeared as an overlay over the portions of the Dungeon he'd explored. He choſe the one outside the ſnake's head. Eight ſeconds after the caſting began, he and everyone in his party had traveled miles and

could see the beautiful sight of the Mist Village's walls.

The guards posted at the entrance to the Dungeon let out surprised shouts at the armed warband appearing before them. They quickly quieted when Caulder shouted that if they wanted to wiggle and squeal like bunch of pigs, then they could muck out the livestock pens. Like soldiers in every reality, the clipped tones of a sergeant's threats commanded instant obedience. The two guards snapped to attention, fists on their chests, "Sir!"

With a fierce look on his face, Caulder turned away, but flashed Richter a quick wink. A smile ghosted across Richter's face; he loved seeing the sergeant work. Then Richter got back down to business. He sent a mental call for Futen and asked Alma to find Hisako. He gave her instructions to describe the wounds his warband had suffered and to ask if the Hearth Mother would come to the Healer's Hut as quickly as possible. The dragonling flew off.

After that, Richter sent all of his warband to the Healer's Hut, even those who were still hale. Caulder tried to beg his way out of it. The sergeant was still a bit shell-shocked from a previous three-day marathon of being poked and prodded by the village's junior healers, but Richter was adamant. He thought it was a good idea for everyone to be checked over after a dungeon dive and planned to have Randy institute that protocol. He sent the mist worker carrying the body of the Death Knight with them. Best

to have Hisako examine it as quickly as possible.

He disbanded the war party as they walked off. Watching his men depart, he shook his head, marveling that the day's adventuring hadn't claimed any lives. There had been touch-and-go moments, and obviously his warband hadn't escaped unscathed, but they were all alive. Even the guard's eye could be restored, based on what he had seen Life masters do in the past.

It wasn't by accident though. Without the strong armor that Krom had made, augmented by the enchantments Richter had added himself, the damage they received would have been exponentially higher. Without the health, mana and stamina potions they had burned through, the warband would not have been able to press through battle after battle and some would definitely have died. Without the enhanced magic of the sprites, the healing magic of the Life mage and the advanced magics that Richter could employ, the entire party might have been overwhelmed in that first skirmish with the bodaks. All of those factors made Richter's fighters a force to be reckoned with, but even with all of those advantages, if not for the nearly god level magic Hisako could employ, a third of his force might stay crippled for life.

The day was a potent reminder that the village needed to grow stronger. As he watched his men move away, Richter promised himself that he wouldn't stop striving. He stood there for a moment, completely centered and focused on his profound duties as a lord.

A gust of wind blew by, bringing to his nose the scent of his own body. It was a horrible potpourri of gore, sweat and blood-stained armor. Wrinkling his nose against the brain-stinging scent, he decided that his pursuit of power could wait fifteen minutes until he washed the worst of his stank off. Richter jogged down the hill after his men, heading for the river.

Thirty minutes later, he felt worlds better. Getting his armor off by himself was always a pain, but being able to scrub away most of the grit and grossness made him feel like a new man. With his new Water spell, he even felt relatively safe in the river, the aether carp swimming around him as a guard. Once he was done he lay on the bank, basking in the warmth of one of the day's last rays of sunshine.

Futen had floated up while he rested, greeting him with his customary deadpan voice. The remnant gave Richter a recap of what had happened during the day. Two more villagers had returned from their trials, a Soaper and a Chandler. Richter had to ask for some clarification, but apparently the first Profession was just what it sounded like, a person who made soap. Richter wasn't going to object to that.

He'd become accustomed to a certain level of funk on people since coming to The Land, but that didn't mean he enjoyed it. The hygiene level in the village was way better than in Law thanks to Sumiko stressing people needed to bathe regularly, but it still wasn't the best. You might think that,

given enough time, you'd stop noticing the scent of baked ass, but you'd be wrong.

The Chandler was apparently a Professional candlemaker. That seemed a bit superfluous considering there were mist lights everywhere, but still, maybe the guy could make a nice scented candle. The longhouses had a way of concentrating scents if enough people were sleeping in them, even with the windows open. Again, baked ass was no picnic and Richter didn't want to put all his hopes in the "medieval soap" basket.

Richter was also treated to a beautiful sight when Elora and all her children found him. He was initially self-conscious at being naked but, truth be told, very few people seemed concerned about nakedness in his village. The queen completely ignored it when she swooped down and grabbed his nose in both hands before placing a kiss on the tip. Then she giggled and drew back, hovering in the air. "Thank you for returning my child, my lord." She performed a perfect curtsy in midair.

"Thank you, Unca Wichter!" her children screamed in unison, then they all spun in the air about him, laughing and causing general mayhem. Richter lay his head back down on the grass and looked up at the beautiful kaleidoscope of colored wings flying above him. Then he closed his eyes again, surrounded by the sound of nearly a hundred children laughing.

The remnant hadn't had much to tell him, so Richter sent Futen to find his Chamberlain and bring him to the Healer's Hut. Donning a clean set of clothes from his bag, he summoned a pair of mist workers. One construct carried his soiled clothes to the area of the village where the washing was done, and the other carried his battered armor to the Forge of Heavens. Richter knew everything would be cleaned and repaired by morning. He chuckled to himself while he thought, it's good to be the chief.

Richter took off at an easy jog and passed through the village walls a minute later. He returned his guards' salutes and made his way east towards the Healer's Hut. His people passed him with smiles on their faces. Now that he was back in the village, he was notified of a change in the village's stats.

+400 Morale Points for boosting the Luck of the entire village by +20, albeit for only one week. This bonus will decrease to **+80** to reflect the +4 baseline Luck boost when the perk bonus fades. Your people are in awe of how you have improved their lives!

Base Morale: **+1592** x 1.55 (+25% Undefeated x +12% Administrator x +10% Health x -2% Crime x +10% Vassal State)

Total Morale Points: **+2,468**

+400 Relationship Points with each villager for increasing the settlement's

Luck. This increase is permanent.

Cha-ching! His new vassal was already paying off. He was only thirty-two points shy of reaching the fourth rank. That would increase the boosts to Productivity, Fighting Spirit and Population Growth from 20% up to 35%. Determined to make his people as happy as possible within reason, no handies, he jogged over to the Healer's Hut.

Moving inside, he smiled at what he saw. Hisako was already there, golden light surrounding her hands as she chanted. Richter walked over and watched as, before his very eyes, she restored the sight of one of his guards. The man sat up right afterwards, blinking in wonder.

"Thank you, Lady Hisako! Thank you!" The guard fell to his knees and hugged the smaller sprite as if she were his actual mother.

"You are welcome," she said gently, with a warm smile. "Your vision may be blurry for the next day, but you will recover fully." She detached the man, who stood, albeit on wobbly legs. She told him to rest, as the healing had sapped his strength. The man thanked her again, tears flowing from both of his perfect eyes.

Hisako walked over to Richter. "I have already healed your other two men. One had a moderate concussion and needed little help. The other's leg was broken in three places, but I have healed the damage. They will both be

back at full strength by morning.”

Richter breathed a sigh of relief. The guards and all his people were like his family. He’d been pretty sure that Hisako could heal them, but a knot of tension eased at *knowing* they were healthy again.

“I see you once again have had an eventful day,” she commented wryly.

He heaved a great sigh, “You could say that.” Then he filled her in on all that had happened. Speaking to the kindir elders, clearing the dungeon, finding out it was a long lost burial chamber for the kindirs’ ancestors, the fight with the ghaist and finally the fact that they were now his vassals. He left out a few details, like the Heart Crystal, because he wanted to discuss that with her in private, but otherwise shared the whole story.

She listened with complete attention, never interrupting. At the end, she merely said, “Eventful indeed... Chief Richter.” She put special emphasis on his title.

There was a time when he would have corrected her. When he would have felt embarrassed to be addressed in such a fashion. A small twinge of that still existed, but he now understood the title was not just an affectation. It was a responsibility. He took his dedication to the kindir of Verget Kunig as seriously as his dedication to his own villagers. That was why he just

bowed his head respectfully towards Hisako and intoned, “We have much more to discuss, my Lady Hearth Mother.”

The two of them were joined by Randolphus at that point. The man strode into the Healer’s Hut in his robes, holding his ever-present clipboard. Richter shook his head. It was strange seeing his new Companion back in this role since he knew the man was a deadly spymaster. Despite his covert alter ego, the noble was the height of propriety, bowing to Hisako and clapping a fist to his chest in salute to Richter. Sighing slightly but seeing no way around it, Richter repeated the rundown of the events. Randolphus’s response was the same as Hisako’s but more pronounced. He went down on one knee and reverently said, “My chief.”

Seeing the chamberlain kneel, every villager nearby and not a few of the freed slaves did the same. A chorus of “Chief Richter” “Chief Mist” and “My chief,” rang out. While Richter was fine with Hisako and Randy saying it privately, seeing the obeisance of everyone within eyeshot creeped him out a bit.

“Get up, get up!” he shouted, motioning with both of his hands. Richter sighed, knowing the story of this would travel like wildfire through the village. He turned towards his chamberlain who was now back on his feet, “Please issue a village-wide announcement that kneeling is not required or even especially wanted. A simple salute with their hands over their hearts

is more than good enough.”

“As you say, my chief!” Randolphus responded with a snap in his voice.

Richter started to glare at the man, but he saw the hint of a smile making one side of the man’s lips twitch up. “Ha ha. You’re a riot. Now look, we have other things to discuss.” Leading them outside, he walked up to the mist worker holding the body of the Death Knight. “This is the body of the ghast. I don’t know if you’ll be able to learn anything from it, but I thought I’d bring it back just in case.”

“I am surprised you were able to overcome such a foe,” Hisako remarked considering, “or that he would engage you in single combat. Death Knights often surround themselves with strong minions.” Her tone was questioning at the end, but Richter still didn’t want to discuss the Duel or the fact that he had gained another Heart Crystal until he was sure there were no prying eyes and ears around.

When he didn’t say anything else, Hisako told him that she would examine the body in detail later and they walked back inside the Healer’s Hut. She added that it was a shame that Sumiko wasn’t back. The other Life master had apparently made a study of the undead, fueled by her hatred for them. It had made her something of an expert.

At that exact moment, a black disc opened in the air next to them. Many exclaimed in surprise, but Richter had seen this before and knew what it meant. He and Hisako shared a smile when Sumiko stepped through the portal in all of her Professional glory.

“Did you do this?” Richter asked the Hearth Mother with wonder in his voice.

“I do not have the power to affect the Trials of another. No one does,” she responded with wonder of her own.

Sumiko looked radiant. The sprite had seen a good number of years, but ever since bonding with her meitu'meidon, her grey hair had become a shining silver and youth and vitality had returned to her skin. Basically, she was rocking a serious GILF vibe.

The newly returned village Healer stepped out into a shaft of sunlight and shook her head back and forth like a model in a shampoo commercial. For a second, Richter was transfixed looking at the short but beautiful woman. She looked back with a smile on her face upon seeing Hisako and Richter.

Then she looked around and her gaze fell on the three newly healed guards. She looked back at Richter with the fierceness of a she-wolf, “What trouble have you brought to my door now? I have not been back more than

ten seconds and you have already brought more men that need tending? Did you convince them to attack an army of trolls? Storm the gates of a necropolis? I suppose I should be happy that the village is even still standing! I...”

Richter leaned back from the hurricane-force winds coming from her mouth. He looked at Hisako for help, but if there were two ubiquitous sprite characteristics, it was their connection with nature and their love of fucking with people. Hisako just stepped back with a smarmy grin on her face and let Sumiko enjoy herself.

About five minutes later, the village Healer finally stopped her rant. She had already checked on the status of the three men who had wisely feigned unconsciousness the whole time, letting their liege bear the brunt of the verbal attack. Sergeant Caulder had previously warned every guard not to challenge the Healer. In the man’s own words, “She may have hair like moonlight, but her soul is pure fire.” Richter had hoped that her ministrations to the patients might slow down her verbal assault on him, but the accomplished sprite was clearly able to bring life with her hands and deliver death with her tongue at the same time.

When he finally got a word in edgewise, he congratulated her on becoming a Mage, for that was exactly what she was now, a Professed Mage. She thanked him sourly, but he still saw the hint of a smile peek through.

Her meitu'pixie was buzzing around her head, delighted that Sumiko had returned. The sprite had wanted to gain a Profession for countless years, and now had finally achieved her goal. When she saw him notice the crack in her hard exterior though she scowled at him anew, and Richter was sure that if she still used a cane she would have been shaking it at him.

“Well?” Sumiko asked sharply. “Despite your best efforts, all three of these men are on the mend, most likely thanks to the Hearth Mother. I know the three of you are not just standing around for fun. What else do I need to know?”

Richter told the story for a third time, then led her outside to see the body of the ghast. Sumiko's hate for the undead was well known, so he wasn't overly surprised when she spit at the sight of it.

“I want to review the memories that I was able to steal from the ghast and I'm asking that all three of you be present. Last time I delved into a memory involving the eldritch lord, he was able to detect me. My mental defenses are much stronger than they were before, but I still don't want to take any chances. In case something goes wrong, I'd like my strongest comrades around me,” Richter told them. They nodded in solidarity.

He focused on Sumiko, “I'm sorry to put you right back to work, but we desperately need your help. Before I access the memory, I'd like you to

inspect the body. More info about the ghaſt could only help and might give me a frame of reference for whatever I ſee in the memory. I alſo need all the freed prifoners teſted with your *Soul's Window* ſpell to ſee if they harbor any ill intentions. As dinner is only an hour away, I was thinking we could have a meal with all the freed prifoners and they could come up to be interviewed one at a time. Tomorrow, with all of you there, I will review the memories. Can you do that?"

The Healer's face was ſtill wrinkled in diſguſt from ſeeing Nien's decapitated corpse, but ſhe nodded, "I will examine the body. I ſhould be done by the time dinner is ſerved. Why are you waiting until tomorrow to review the memories, however?"

Richter looked up at Alma flying above his head. He alſo hadn't told any of them about his ability to bond with Alma and aſſume dragonform. That wasn't becauſe he felt uncomfortable ſharing the information, it was more becauſe Richter loved a big reveal. "I have my reaſons," he reſponded enigmatically with a faint ſmile.

It was quiet for a moment, before Sumiko ſpoke with a ſnap in her voice, "Fine. If you are not going to tell me then at leaſt ſtop grinning like an idiot and let me get to work. Now ſhoo!"

Sumiko practically forced Richter away from the Healer's Hut.

Hisako and Randolphus walked with him. The Hearth Mother offered her help, “I also know the *Soul’s Window* spell, of course. I could help Sumiko test your new people if you will trust my judgment.”

Richter smiled wryly at the Hearth Mother, “I trust you with my life and the secret of my Chaotic nature,” he replied. “I would be honored to have you help test the men and women I’m considering adding to my village.”

“You could have asked before, you know,” she told him.

“You already do so much for me. For us,” Richter amended. “I did not want to impose on your good nature. It never occurred to me that you would say ‘no’ if I asked you for help. You have such a generous spirit.”

She stopped walking and placed a hand on Richter’s cheek, “You are such a sweet boy when you want to be,” she told him warmly. Then she gave him a light slap on the same cheek with just enough force that it made a solid *smack*, “But no one likes a suck-up. Just ask for help next time, gyoti!”

Richter laughed out loud and Randolphus had to hide a grin behind his papers. The chaos seed nodded and replied, “Yes ma’am.”

He was about to start another topic when another black disc appeared in front of him. Hisako and Richter shared a look and the same unspoken thought. What were the chances of two people returning from their Trials

almost at the same time? Then a wide grin grew on Richter's face because he thought he understood. Everyone in his village had just become twenty points luckier. Put another way, the village itself had gained twenty points of Luck. What could be luckier for a settlement than a large number of Professionals showing up all at once?

Ulinde stepped out the portal and the black disc vanished. The elven archer looked around with a broad smile on his face. Richter quickly used *Analyze* and found that the man was now a Ranger.

“Congratulations!” Richter commended him.

Ulinde clapped his fist to his heart, “Thank you, my lord!”

Before anyone could say anything else, another black disc appeared. Then another, then another, then another! Many of his villagers had already been walking towards the feast area so they saw the Mist Village's latest Professionals return. Soon the entire village was abuzz, and everyone except the freed slaves and the guards on duty had gathered.

Randolphus waded into the insanity and quickly gathered his two helpers around him. In no time at all, the simple dinner that had been planned was transformed into a feast, and the village stores were plundered for a celebration. It was customary in The Land to commemorate such a momentous event as gaining a Profession. In the midst of the festivities, the

chamberlain spoke with each person that had returned from their Trial. As the party truly got underway, he brought over a list of all the people that Nexus had absconded with and the Professions they had gained.

Noncombat Professions (18)				
Chandler Joseph	Soaper Jeremiah	Lumberjack Berin	Cook Takko	Shipwright Shiovana
Sailor Jerry	Weaver Hilda	Miner Poltan	Enchanter Gloran	Maid Tifini
Hunter Radil	Smith Krom	Farmer Danot	Cordwainer Wudhous	Carpenter Ulin
	Locksmith Burk	Herbalist Isabella	Courtesan Inara	

The first names were all noncombat Professions. To gain one, a person had to have a personal level of ten and a skill level of forty-five. Richter was excited to see the wide variety of Pros the village now had access to. He also planned to schedule some time with Inara ASAP. Burk the Locksmith, on the other hand, concerned him a bit. He couldn't help but wonder if the man had a criminal past.

Randolphus explained that building locks gave the skill Lock Picking as well though. He *then* went on to explain that in Burk's case, Richter's concern was completely warranted. The man had been a thief back in Law. With a smile on his face, the Spy said he would keep an eye on him and already had a few ideas about how to put his skills to good use. Richter was left wondering if the Mist Village might have a spy training program sometime soon, but decided to leave it in Randy's hands.

He did make a point of saying he wanted Burk and Ulin the Carpenter to get together to begin making strong chests. Richter wanted some for the village, but he wanted others placed in the Dungeon. He was sure the Dungeon could make chests by itself, but it might cost Dungeon Points that could instead be funneled towards making treasure to fill them. Richter was hoping that the Dungeon might "take a hint" and start filling the empty chests that were placed in it. The chamberlain told him it would be done.

The next piece of paper Randolphus handed over had the names of those who had gained combat Professions. To gain one of these, a person still needed to be *journeyman* rank or higher in a skill, but also had to have a personal level of at least twenty.

Combat Professions (8)			
Warriors	Ranger	Rogue	Magi

Cath	Ulinde	Hanso	Sumiko
Ygritte			Quasea
Wisteria			Zarr

Richter raised his eye at seeing that Hanso had become a Rogue. Randolphus nodded in understanding. “He is one of the guards that Caulder brought with him. I was told that he was extremely useful against the thieves’ guilds in Law due to his high Stealth skill.”

“That could come in handy.”

“I intend to take over his training once I can be sure of his loyalty and discretion,” the chamberlain told his lord. “Burk will be given similar instruction as well as any other villagers I find that have the necessary affinities and disposition.” Richter smiled at that. Yup, he was definitely about to have a spy school!

Randolphus continued, “In the meantime, I have already thought of several ways Hanso can be put to good use.” The chamberlain’s tone changed, “I must confess, my lord, I am quite surprised by these results. Not only has almost every villager returned from their Trials early, but none of them have failed either. We are extremely lucky on both counts.”

Richter just smiled in response. He now had no doubt this was

happening because of the special perk from his new vassal. He turned his attention back to the paper in his hand. Near the bottom of the page, the chamberlain had made a list of the Professionals that had already been in the village.

Scholars	Enchanter	Alchemist	Herbalist	Warrior
Bartle	Lord Richter	Tabia	Queen Elora	Mimi
Bea				

When he had founded the village, he'd had a dream about raising the levels of his people so that he had a population of Professionals. This was an amazing first step! Nearly 5% of the village's citizens were now Pros! As excited as he was though, there was one name that was missing from the list. Well, two names really, but it was completely understandable that a Spy wouldn't write his own name on a list. Randy might as well have worn a sign saying, "Hey! I'm a Spy."

"Where is..." Richter began.

"I know, my lord. I am sure he will return soon." Randolphus reassured him.

"Okay," Richter replied, nodding. There was nothing he could do about it. "Will you speak with everyone about what Talents they'll invest

in?”

“Of course, my lord. Most have already asked for time with me so that their Talent purchases can best serve you and the village.”

Richter looked at him in surprise. A Profession was a lifelong pursuit and Talent Points were exceptionally hard to come by. Buying a Talent was a major life decision. He had hoped that Randy might guide a few of them to choose Talents that would support the village rather than just themselves. That meant they might have to forgo other Talents though. Talents that could make them more valuable out in the wide world. The fact that many of the new Professionals would even consider buying Talents to help the village as a whole boded well, and was probably a reflection of the settlement’s high Morale and Loyalty. Richter was reminded yet again how the subtle mechanics of The Land could have serious consequences for good or ill. He was elated that this time the effect seemed to be “good.” It was even more meaningful when you took into account that those who had sworn fealty to him had agreed to serve him and the village for life. Only about a quarter of the current village population had bent the knee. Everyone else was only obligated to finish their year-long contract. “How many asked how they could help out?”

“Twenty, my lord, and they are all ready to bend the knee,”
Randolphus said with a faint smile. “They are ready to do it right now.”

Richer easily returned his smile. Twenty-six new Professionals had just returned. Krom, Ulinde and Sumiko had already pledged their fealty. That meant twenty of the remaining twenty-three new Professionals were willing to tie their lives to his! He was almost overcome with emotion, but the pragmatic and planning side of him took control. “Let’s hold off for just a few moments. Go touch base with Sumiko and Hisako. The feast is about to get into high swing. If they’ve finished testing everyone, separate the freed prisoners into groups.

“One group should be those who have passed Hisako and Sumiko’s tests and want to stay in the village; escort them to the feast area. A second group should comprise those who pass the tests and want to leave. Keep them where they are. Have food brought, but make it clear that they will not be given another chance to join. It is time to either move forward with us, or to be left behind.” Randolphus nodded. “Once you bring the first group here, then we’ll do the fealty ceremony.” He winked at his Companion, “Then I’ll show everyone the benefits of membership,” he added with a laugh.

“And... those that have not passed the tests?” Randolphus asked.

Richter’s face hardened somewhat. The test was easy. It was just three questions. Did they have ill will towards Richter or the village? Were they harboring a secret that might harm Richter or the village? Were they,

actively or passively, working against Richter or the village? A ‘Yes’ to the first question could be discussed. A ‘Yes’ to the second question, and they would be given the opportunity to unburden themselves. A ‘Yes’ to the third meant interrogation and possibly death.

That had been the *previous* policy. Richter was not nearly as soft-hearted as he had once been however, “Anyone who fails any of the questions fails them all. Have them taken to the Entrance Chamber of the Dungeon and interrogate them personally. After you have learned what you can,” his voice turned cold, “death by Dungeon. Do it quietly, but take no chances. I will not have the safety of our village compromised again.”

“As you say, my chief,” Randolphus responded deferentially, bowing his head.

Richter shook off the mantle of anger that had landed on him for a moment. The fact that it seemed to find him more easily these days bothered him, but in a distant way. That could be dealt with another time. “Good!” he pronounced, clapping his hands together. “Then I am going to go speak with our new Professionals, and find out what the hell a ‘cordwainer’ is!”

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Turns out, a cordwainer made shoes.

The rest of the night went great. Thankfully, the trial he had held seemed to have purged anyone treacherous from the ranks of the freed slaves. Of the three-hundred and seventy-six former prisoners, three hundred and fifty-nine, more than ninety-five percent, wanted to stay in the village. The remaining seventeen wanted to leave, but no one had failed the three questions. Richter was elated and planned to add everyone in the first group to the village.

Randolphus had raised a word of caution upon hearing his liege's plans. Adding so many new people to the village, all at once, could very well have a deleterious effect on the village Morale and Loyalty. There were also other considerations, like housing. They barely had enough space to house their current population. In truth, they were already above capacity, but as it was still the tail end of summer many people didn't mind sleeping outside.

With several hundred new official villagers though, there might be penalties that would only worsen until more housing was constructed. To compound the problem, the one guy they needed to fix that problem still hadn't made it back from his Trial.

Richter had already thought about all of that though, and had decided to stay with the original mission statement of his settlement. He had created the Mist Village to be a beacon of hope and acceptance in The Land. To create at least one location where those in need could come for help. Mere survival was not enough for him. It was important that he, and his works, stand for something.

Besides, he wasn't about to say no to hundreds more workers ready to build up his armies and village. They did live in the middle of fucking nowhere, after all. Sometimes you have to stop being picky and just be happy to get it in. Richter had plans, not the least of which was advancing his village to level two. Richter still remembered getting that prompt after first taking control of his Place of Power.

Requirements for increasing the Mist Village to Level 2:

- 1) Increase population to at least **100***
- 2) Build **10** freestanding buildings*
- 3) Master **3** levels of the Catacombs*

4) Finish 4 quests of the Mist Village.

The requirements hadn't seemed so tough at first, but now he knew the requirements were like saying "Brush your teeth. Wash your face. Design, fabricate and launch an intercontinental ballistic missile. Make a bowl of cereal." He'd accomplished the first criteria and was almost done with the last. The second wasn't too far away from being fulfilled either. As for the third criteria, level one of the catacombs was populated with tens of thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands, of kobolds. He hadn't even gone down to the catacombs again because his last interaction with the dog-faced lizardmen, although profitable, had made him a serious enemy and had almost claimed his life. If he was going to have any hope of conquering the first level of the catacombs, let alone the first three, he needed more soldiers.

A small piece of him had quailed when he'd first had that thought. It railed against the idea of leading even more men and women into harm's way after having just lost so many in a battle that only ended days ago. He had not been raised to equivocate and wring his hands though.

Another way to say it was that just because a truth was inconvenient didn't mean you shied away from it. No, that was when you looked even closer. The truth Richter had to face was that there were more battles coming, and some of his people would die no matter what he did. Simply by claiming his Place of Power and building his village, conflict had become

inevitable. There would always be those that felt threatened by the accomplishments of others, and his village was a shining beacon. The more powerful it became; the more others would want to steal what he had built. At least by preparing his people, by building his armies and by taking precautions, the village and its people had a chance to survive.

After he accepted that truth, the decision became much easier. Would he lay down and let others run roughshod over him, or would he fight to protect his own? Richter chose life. He thanked Randolphus for his counsel, but told the chamberlain to bring everyone that wanted to stay in the village to the feast area.

Once all the freed slaves who had decided to stay in the village were present, Richter called for silence. Sumiko, Hisako, Sion, Terrod, Caulder and several others stood with him on a stage at the end of the dining area. The new Professionals were brought up to stand with him one at a time. Randolphus arranged for the men and women who wanted to swear fealty to approach first. There were cheers of congratulations as the first man approached. Those same people all gasped when Richter rewarded him with a silver Quickening fruit.

He made it clear that each Professional who bent the knee would be rewarded not only in the long term, but also immediately with this priceless item. After consuming the celestial fruit, some of the men and women even

advanced a skill level if their affinity was pushed above 100%. Richter's vision was momentarily occluded again and again with prompts showing his increase in relationship with the people who knelt before him.

The truesilver rinds of each fruit were collected and handed to Krom. The dwarf's grin was almost creepy, even hidden by his salt-and-pepper beard. It was obvious that the dwarf couldn't wait to go back to playing with the celestial metal. Richter had already given orders that each of the combat Professionals receive a truesilver weapon that fit their combat style. He intended for them to wear them proudly even when inside the village. The celestial metal would be a daily reminder to everyone in the village of just how well he treated those who served him. The end goal was to have every soul in the village united in fealty under him. The truesilver weapons were just one step in a PR campaign designed to accomplish that goal.

With that thought in mind, it was no surprise that the last three Professional holdouts also swore fealty when their time came at the end of the ceremony. Richter cast a small glance at Sumiko who gave an almost imperceptible nod to each. She had secretly been using her *Soul's Window* spell to ensure that the expected change of heart was genuine and not merely lip service.

After the ceremony was done, the quiet part of the night was also over. He had the former slaves, now new villagers, approach the stage in

groups of ten. They all expressed their desire to join the village. He shook the hand of each man, woman and child. Each group was met with resounding cheers and pulled to various tables. This had been Randolphus's idea, to immediately start integrating the new people with the old. A serious dent had been made in the village's ale stores as well, much to the ire of some of the dwarves who hated to see good lager wasted on... well, anyone that wasn't them.

What was a bit of a surprise, was that two hundred of the freed prisoners bent the knee and swore fealty as well. Forty-one of the three hundred and fifty-nine new villagers were children and so couldn't swear fealty by Richter's own laws, which made the number of men and women pledging their lives and loyalty to him even more astounding. Some of the parents tried to have their kids pledge allegiance as well, but Richter remained firm in his rule that no one below the age of fourteen could commit themselves to him. He wanted people to be with him because they chose to be, not because the decision was made for them. This wasn't for any sentimental reason, but more because a Machiavellian corner of his mind knew that bonds were stronger when people chose them themselves.

After the welcoming ceremony was done, Richter received a series of prompts showing how these newest villagers had changed the village's Dynamics.

Know This! Your village has grown by leaps and bounds. Never forget, there are consequences to your actions.

*Your village had 694 souls with an average base Morale of **+1592** and an average base Loyalty of **+1,485***

*You have now added 359 souls with an average base Morale of **-628** and an average base Loyalty of **+3,811***

The following adjustments have been made to your village values:

Base Morale decreased by -757

*Morale Modifiers: **+835** x 1.74 (+25% Undeclared x +12% Administrator x +10% Health x -2% Crime)*

*Total Morale Points: **+1,210***

Base Loyalty increased by +762

*Loyalty Modifiers: **+2,278** x 1.47 (+25% Undeclared x +12% Administrator x +10% Health)*

*Total Loyalty Points: **+3,349***

DING!

*The Loyalty Rank of Mist Village **increased** from **Reliable (Rank 3: +1000)** to **Trusting (Rank 4: +2500)***

“Your people believe your words and follow your commands easily. Your words can even start to sculpt their ideas and beliefs. They begin to put the

well-being of the settlement above their own.”

Loyalty Rank Reward (40% → 70%): +70% to Productivity

Richter hadn't known exactly how down in the dumps the freed slaves had been, but he was actually relieved that it hadn't been worse. They had been the victims of murder, rape and other horrible abuses; that they could even smile now was a testament to their inner strength, in his opinion.

The fact that they had recently been freed and given three hots and a cot had probably improved their Morale somewhat as well. On the whole, adding the new villagers had been a positive change for the village. The overall Loyalty had jumped a rank and he was already excited about the boost to Productivity. True, he had lost a great deal of Morale Points, but the village was still rank three, *elated*, so there hadn't been any direct negative effects. He had to think that the freed prisoners' Morale would improve as more time passed.

The increase in the village's Loyalty was staggering. He'd finally broken into the fourth rank of one of his City Mechanics, and the boost was awesome! Even with the -2% loss from having a *negligible* Crime level, factoring in all the numbers from Loyalty, Morale and Health gave his village a +98% boost to Productivity! Just what he needed before a big battle, he thought with a smile.

There were a few more notifications.

*The **Housing** available in your settlement is now 50% below capacity for your population. You have **1** week to solve this issue or -5 will be subtracted from village Morale each day for a max loss of -500.*

That prompt was not the best, but he did have a full week to fix the problem. With the boost to Productivity, he wasn't overly worried. There was some other good news as well.

Congratulations! You have completed a Quest: **Potential for Greatness I**

The fruit of the Quickening has been fed to ten Professionals in your village. Your people are on the path towards a celestial evolution.

Reward: 1,250 (base 1,000 x 1.25) experience

Reward: +1% chance of Professionals who have both sworn fealty to you and eaten the flesh of the Quickening fruit to have up to 1 of their Talents celestially augmented.

He also got the next link in the quest chain calling for another twenty Professionals to be fed the fruit of the Quickening. Even though Randolphus couldn't partake because of his *evil* alignment, there were now more than enough Professionals in the village to fulfill the criteria and Richter was

rewarded with another completion prompt.

Congratulations! You have completed the Quest: **Potential for Greatness II**

The fruit of the Quickening has been fed to thirty Professionals in your village. The next step in celestial evolution has been taken.

Reward: 2,500 (base 2,000 x 1.25) experience.

Reward: +2% (total 3%) chance of the Professionals who have both sworn fealty to you and eaten the flesh of the Quickening to have 1 (up to 2) of their Talents celestially augmented.

Congratulations! You have unlocked a Quest: **Potential for Greatness III**

Only Professionals with a “Good” or “Neutral” alignment may safely consume the fruit of the Quickening. Current Count: 32/60.

Success Conditions: Feed the fruit of the Quickening to sixty different Professionals

Reward: Unknown

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: None

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Know This! Your leadership has inspired more than 50% of your villagers to swear fealty. Ongoing changes in Loyalty are now 3x as effective.

You have no ongoing changes in Loyalty!

Richter gratefully accepted the third link in the quest chain. The red prompt reminding him that he'd lost the Honorable Tenet was a bit of a nut flick, but he didn't let it bring him down. The party kept going and the new villagers seemed to be integrating without too much bother. There were definitely some haunted faces, but there had been loss among the old villagers as well. He saw more than one group off to the side, raising toasts to fallen friends and lost loved ones, making sure they were not forgotten.

The chaos seed actually got tired a bit early despite his Belt of Sustenance. The day had been extremely long. Even his short nap on the bank of the river hadn't been enough to balance the physical demands of the dungeon dive. He was about to sneak away and leave his people to their festivities when a guard rushed up and whispered in his ear.

His mind instantly cleared and he jumped up. Randolphus and Sion looked at him in surprise. Richter motioned with his head for them to follow as he started jogging towards the south gate. When he got there, he looked around to no avail. One of the guards said, "A black disc opened, he came through, then it sounded like there was angry shouting coming from the other

side. He just stayed there with that expression on his face. You know, the one that means he could be thinking about birds or plotting your death and he is mad about it either way?”

Richter nodded; he knew it all too well. The guard continued his story, “Then he asked where the Dungeon was. I did not see any reason not to tell him, but as soon as I did, he took off running. I swear, my lord, I told him to wait, that it was not safe beyond the village walls at night, but he did not listen. I sent two guards to protect him and another to find you, Lord Richter.”

Richter nodded and told the guard he’d done well. He kept jogging, his two Companions in tow. Even though the sun had fallen, it was easy to navigate thanks to the many mist lights positioned outside the city walls. The three of them moved quickly to the hill that held the Dungeon and jogged up to the top. When they got there, the chaos seed saw something he had never thought he’d ever see.

Roswan was giggling. Like, giggling like a little girl. His gaze was locked on the entrance to the Dungeon and he didn’t even notice Richter until the chaos seed walked directly in front of him. When that happened, the elf turned his gaze and his mustache on the chaos seed. “Well done, my lord. Well done!” He looked at the cave mouth again before turning his gaze back to his liege. His eyes unfocused for a moment in the way people did when

they were accessing their interface. Then a new round of giggles pealed forth. “I am a Dungeon Keeper!”

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“What!”

“I am a Dungeon Keeper!” Roswan repeated excitedly. The normally taciturn elf’s eyes were positively dancing. His mouth was set in a super-creepy rictus of a grin, though the thick brown caterpillar mustache seemed too heavy for the man to keep that expression for long. “It is my Specialty!”

“Specialty?” Richter asked. None of this was making any sense and it was starting to piss him off. For one thing, you had to get a Profession before you could get a Specialty. And as far as he knew, once you got your Profession, you had to advance for at least ten personal levels. Roswan had only been level twelve when he’d left for his Trial. Not wanting to waste more time or risk more maddening answers, he decided to just use *Analyze*.

Name: Roswan	Race: Wood Elf	Profession: Engineer
Level: 22	Disposition: Happy	Specialty: Dungeon Keeper

STATS		
Health: 170	Mana: 330	Stamina: 250
ATTRIBUTES		
Strength: 23	Agility: 15	Dexterity: 35
Constitution: 17	Endurance: 25	Intelligence: 33
Wisdom: 12	Charisma: 15	Luck: 14
SKILLS		
Construction: 47 <i>Masonry:</i> 38 <i>Carpentry:</i> 35 <i>Design:</i> 28 <i>Repair:</i> 36	Unarmed Combat: 27	Cooking: 14
	Tracking: 15	Fishing: 24
	Puzzle Solving: 23	
ALLEGIANCE		
Liege Lord: Richter of the Mist Village Job: Builder of the Mist Village		
DESCRIPTION		
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.		

“How in the holy hells did you jump ten levels?” Richter blurted in surprise. “And how did you get a Specialty? And what the hell is Puzzle Solving? And why are you so good at Unarmed Combat?”

Roswan finally came back to himself a bit, and gave his signature,

“Grrrrmmm. The answer to the last question is that for some reason an inordinate number of people need a good punch to the face. In answer to your third question, I do not want to talk about it. In answer to the first two questions, you should know that the magic of the Trial prevents me from giving too many details, but this is what I can tell you.”

Then the mustached elf began a story of epic proportions. It had love, drama and the involvement of what Richter thought could only be gods! At the end, Richter, Sion and even Randolphus were gasping and laughing.

“You have to tell the scribes about this,” Sion said, wiping his eyes free of tears. “It deserves to be a book.”

“Grrrrmmm,” the elf responded. “but for now, at least you understand how I became a Dungeon Keeper. Now,” he stated, “I assume that you are the Dungeon Master, Lord Richter?”

“I am,” the chaos seed replied, still reeling a bit at Roswan’s insane story.

“Will you make me the Dungeon Keeper for the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos?”

Something clicked in Richter’s head. “Wait. So, after you went through all that during your Trial... and I imagine there must be even more that happened that you can’t tell us about... after all that you came back to the

village and irrevocably chose the Specialty, Dungeon Keeper.” Roswan nodded. “A Specialty that only works if you have access to a Dungeon,” Richter continued. Roswan nodded again but with a frown this time. “And it just so happens that lil ol’ me has the only Dungeon around, huh?” Richter was getting giddy with finally having something he could hold over the implacable elf. “Is that about right?” he asked with a horrible grin.

Roswan’s face was growing more and more grim as he watched Richter working himself up to the finale.

“I think,” Richter’s voice was casual and innocent, totally in contrast to the devilry in his eyes, “that you would be a great Dungeon Keeper. But,” and his voice was full of fake sorrow, “I just wouldn’t feel comfortable giving you command of my Dungeon... unless I knew a bit more about you personally.”

Roswan’s glare could have lit Richter on fire if he’d been an X-man. His frown could have provided structural support to the Coliseum. His mustache could have been a Lord of the Dance the way it quivered... if his mustache were sentient, and Richter wasn’t a hundred percent sure that it wasn’t. His ‘Grmmm’... as well as his ‘Grmmmm’ ... were so deep they probably felt the aftershocks all the way in Yves.

Richter was not about to be dissuaded though. He’d had a hell of a

long day. He'd almost died multiple times but somehow managed to come out on top. Then he'd increased the population of his village by almost 50% and had given the village's Productivity a serious boost. Being able to fuck with Roswan, the elf who'd continually met his every question with a goddamned 'Grmmm' was the cherry on top of his day, and he was going to have his fucking cherry!

“Oh yeah,” Richter said, nodding and grinning like a maniac. “If you want to be my Dungeon Keeper, then we are about to bond. We are going to have five minutes of... you know what? I'll take one minute. We will have one minute of small talk. And hear me well, elf. It is going to be casual, and it is going to be amicable!”

The sound that Roswan let out this time sounded like a yak with intestinal problems. Kind of a low groan that also squealed a bit at the end. His face tightened up so much that Richter thought his nose might actually have the gravitational pull of a black hole. The chaos seed waited him out, knowing he was holding all the cards. Sion and Randolphus just stood off to the side, watching this most philosophical of battles between an unstoppable force and an immovable object. That night, they saw a miracle. The object moved.

“Fine!” Roswan finally caved. “Damn you, human! What exactly do you want to know?”

“I want one minute of you telling me personal facts about yourself,” Richter told him, his smile unwavering. He’d won! He was riding so high he didn’t even mind that the elf had sworn at him. Roswan was clearly about to start ranting again, but the chaos just said, “Startiiiiing... now.”

The elf heaved a deep sigh, but did as he was bid, “I do not eat vegetables. That includes fish... because it is a vegetable. I also do not believe in drinking water. It is a beverage that does not try enough. Be whiskey or do not exist. I love riddles. I only have nine toes, and the most graceful animal on the planet is a mini-horse.”

“You mean a pony?” Sion asked completely confused.

“No, son! A mini-horse!” It was clear from Roswan’s tone that he felt the sprite had just used fighting words.

Sion looked at the chamberlain, who just widened his eyes and shook his head. Richter got them back on track, “Okay. Is there anything else I should know? Are you ready for this responsibility?”

The elf looked back at Richter with a fierce gaze and firmly pronounced, “I was born ready. I’m Ro-fucking-swan.”

There was absolute silence for a moment, but every one of them knew he meant it in the cockles of his heart.

“Good enough for me, buddy,” Richter told the elf with a laugh.

“There are still a lot of buildings that need to be constructed though. I can’t have you just playing around in the Dungeon all day. If I make you Dungeon Keeper, I still need you to devote at least eight hours a day to building up the village. The Townhall will need your attention first. Any of the rest of your time you can spend working in the Dungeon.”

“Grrmm,” the elf expressed in displeasure. “How long do I have to split my focus?”

“For the foreseeable future,” Richter told him firmly, “but I might be open to decreasing your hours if we find a replacement for you.”

“Actually, my lord,” Randolphus interjected. He was looking at his clipboard, “There is a Builder gnome among the new villagers who is a *journeyman* in Construction.”

“Well that’s good news,” Richter replied. “What’s her name?”

“Lezli, Lord Richter. She is also among those who swore fealty to you.”

“Lezli,” Richter repeated slowly, as if tasting the name. “Lezli Gnome.” It rang a bell for some reason, but he just couldn’t place it. “Okay. If she agrees to become the village Builder, and if you do what you can to train her up, then I’ll be open to decreasing the hours I need you to commit to the village.” He plastered a big smile on his face again. “See! Isn’t this fun?”

Us talking? I feel closer to you already, Roswan!”

With his stoic face, Roswan replied, “I feel closer to you too, Roger.”

Richter looked at him like he was crazy, but decided a win was a win. They’d talk more about what it meant to be a Dungeon Keeper in the morning, but right then he was dying for some sleep. He accessed his interface and assigned Roswan as the Dungeon Keeper.

*Do you wish to assign the wood elf, Roswan, to the Job of **Dungeon Keeper**?
Yes or No?*

Richter chose “Yes,” but then got a warning prompt.

*A person may only hold one village Job at a time. Assigning Roswan as the village **Dungeon Keeper** will remove him from the Job of village **Builder**.
Do you still wish to make this personnel change? Yes or No?*

With a faint sigh, Richter chose “Yes” again. He hoped this Lezli chick was up to the task.

*Roswan has been removed from his position as village **Builder**. The bonus from him holding this position has been removed. -6% to speed of Constructing buildings.*

*Congratulations! You have filled another Job. Roswan is now the village **Dungeon Keeper**! This position can only be filled by an Engineer who also meets the particular criteria to choose this **rare** Specialty. The bonuses*

afforded will reflect such a rare individual.

- 1) +10% to earned Dungeon Points each Day.*
- 2) New functionality can now be seen in the Dungeon interface by both the Dungeon Master and the Dungeon Keeper*
- 3) Roswan can now summon mist workers from his personal village mana pool*
- 4) Roswan can actively use Dungeon Points and affect passive allocation of Dungeon Points*
- 5) Once the prerequisites are met, your Dungeon will be able to access the Labyrinth Store*
- 6) Cannot be directly harmed by any force associated with his Dungeon, but is not protected from the Labyrinth. Even gods may die in that realm!*

Know This! Your choice for Dungeon Keeper has two Qualities that make him ideally suited to become a Dungeon Keeper.

- 1) **Antisocial** – Roswan is not fond of social interaction. He will be able to devote himself fully to the Dungeon. The result of this dedication is +10% to natural growth of monsters, plants and excavated space. This Quality will also make it easy for him to deal with the emotional ramifications of the Dungeon feeding on sapients.*

No shit, Richter thought to himself. Seriously, it was kind of crazy that The Land itself recognized that the man didn't really like people. It was a valid point though. And crazy or not, Richter was in favor of anything that helped his Dungeon grow.

Richter did want his Dungeon to grow, but he'd be damned before he used his own people to feed it. Randolphus had said that Adventurers and monsters from the Labyrinth could find the Dungeon, and the chaos seed was honestly okay with them being eaten. The Adventurers would know the risks and monsters were just monsters. Richter wasn't sure if he personally would feel okay preparing traps and tricks on a daily basis to make the Dungeon more deadly. Roswan, on the other hand, might just be the perfect choice for the role. The man certainly wasn't evil, but he gave zero fucks. In some ways, the guy was perfectly suited for the role.

Richter's inquisitive mind started to wonder if Roswan had become a Dungeon Keeper just by chance or if it had always been his destiny. Chicken or the egg, Richter thought to himself with a headshake. No chance of answering that particular question, so he turned his attention back to the notifications and Roswan's second Quality.

2) **Puzzle Master** – *Your choice of Dungeon Keeper has an innate love of and ability to solve puzzles. The result of this Quality is +10% difficulty to both finding and disarming traps.*

Richter was still surprised that Roswan liked puzzles, and he wasn't crazy about the idea of deadlier traps. As his chamberlain had continually reminded him though, the Dungeon was a resource that needed to be protected from whomever might find their way into it from the Labyrinth. Either way, it was done, and honestly, he was excited to see what Roswan could do with the Dungeon. Richter said goodnight to everyone and walked off with Sion in tow.

Randolphus stayed behind for a moment to ask Roswan a question, "Why did you say Lord Richter's name wrong?"

"When people get too close to me, I like to call them by the wrong name. It discourages them from thinking that we're friends."

Randolphus looked off into the distance with a considering look on his face. "That's a great policy." Roswan nodded sagely right before the chamberlain added, "Bill."

The elf just smiled faintly and walked into the Dungeon.

CHAPTER 77 – Day 145 – Kuborn 35, 0 AoC



Richter was awoken the next morning by a glowing night light. He was completely confused at first as he had been in the middle of a dream about Xena as a nurse. Needless to say, he was more than a bit pissed when he realized that Futen was hovering above his bed.

“What,” he seethed through gritted teeth, “do you want?”

The remnant had at least learned enough to moderate the volume of his voice when waking Richter up, “I was instructed to wake you by Randolphus. He is outside the door of your chamber and said that I should remind you that Hisako and Sumiko will be at the Great Seal by first light to review the memories that you gained from the Death Knight. He wishes to speak with you first.”

Richter closed his eyes and groaned a bit, but knew that his Companion wouldn’t have woken him if it wasn’t important. “How long till sunrise?”

“Less than one hour, my lord,” came the monotone reply.

“Okay, tell him I’ll meet him in the conference room in a minute.”

The glowing orb floated out of the room. Richter sat up and looked to his right. A pleasant memory came to mind as he saw who shared his bed. When he had been walking back to the catacombs, he’d been intercepted by Carei.

The sexy woman had swayed up to him and said, “We need to talk, my lord, about the bet.”

“Bet?” he’d asked confused. All he really remembered about her was seeing her beautiful round bottom in his bed after the last party.

With a pouting moue, she’d responded, “Do you not remember? I suppose that is understandable as you were quite intoxicated when we first met. You sat down at my table and decided to learn how to play Kings and Thieves. A card game,” she added after seeing his questioning look. “You picked it up fairly well, and were luckier than you had a right to be. Each round, you chose to increase the stakes, until the last round, when you bet my body against your body for a night.”

“Oh,” had been Richter’s slow reply, “and that’s how we ended up in bed together?”

“Yes,” she’d replied. “I am here because you were quite detailed

about the terms of the bet, and all the criteria were not met the other night. I believe debts should be paid in full.”

“Hmmm,” Richter had hmmm’d, looking at the sexy woman. At that moment, he had experienced a crisis of conscience. While it might have been true that he’d been playing it fast and loose with his old school Christian upbringing since coming to The Land, the idea of taking a woman to bed because she lost a bet was a bit off even for him. Of course, he didn’t feel bad about whatever had gone down the other night, but taking her to bed again... when neither of them were drunk... just because she felt obligated to pay off a debt... even though she looked so damn good... and even though her mouth had already been a bit open... no, he just wasn’t *fully* okay with that. So he’d come to a decision. He’d have to politely turn her down, and if she kept on asking him about the sweet words he’d said in private, he’d just have to level and tell her, ‘Oh... well... that’s just what we call pillow talk, baby!’

With pious righteousness flowing through him, he’d told her, “I’m flattered, but I can’t take you back to my bed because of a debt you owe me.” Carei had opened her mouth to interject, but he’d cut her off, “Now, now. I’m sure that you had a great time, and it’s totally natural that once you find a great ride you want to hop back on. I get it.” He’d had a sympathetic and understanding smile on his face, “There is no judgment. You’re in the

trust tree, in the nest, and I'd be lying if I said that I didn't want to dive back into all that," he'd admitted, motioning to her gorgeously slim body, "sometime soon. I can't sleep with you just because you owe me a debt though. Consider your debt absolved." He'd finished his saintly speech with a large flourish of his hands. Richter had been feeling real good about himself, even going so far as to think, I am a gentleman.

Carei had let him say his piece without interruption. When he was done though, she had grabbed the front of his shirt in a fist and pulled him close. The ridiculousness of a five-foot-six woman who, even with her big booty, looked like she weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet and wearing boots, pulling his six-foot-four, two hundred twenty pounds of pure muscle towards her had flashed across his mind before she'd spoken in a deadly serious voice, "You didn't win that last bet, lordling. You lost!" Richter's eyes had opened wide in surprise as she continued, "Now. I was okay with you getting a little nap after the first round since you brought that cute redhead and those gorgeous twins to bed as well, but then you decided to go adventuring. My patience has come to an end! You will pay me what you owe me, and you will do so now! In your own words, it is time for 'boning, the wild mambo' and," she thought for a moment before remembering, "the... 'hunka-chunka!'"

Then she'd bit his earlobe hard enough to draw a little blood. When

he had pulled back with a slightly surprised cry, he saw her rubbing his blood on her lips like it was chapstick. After tasting it with the tip of her tongue, she had started walking towards the catacombs, clearly expecting him to follow. Almost as an afterthought, she'd added, "And you're going to want to put on that Fish Ring you told me about, unless you think you can hold your breath for a solid four minutes without it."

Richter had stared after her for a moment, his heart thudding, before he chased after. On the run he'd retrieved the ring as instructed. With a broad smile on his face, he'd watched her fat ass sway in front of him as he followed. In the back of his mind, a sing-song phrase had been cycling through his head:

We going to Sizzler. We going to Sizzler!

Fast forward to now, the woman was snuggled into his bed. As Richter got up, he could only think that despite monsters trying to kill him every day, life wasn't all bad. Carei whined slightly in her sleep as he took his warmth away, so he just rubbed her bottom for a bit until she settled back into sleep. Alma picked her head up from where she was sleeping on the edge of the bed and blearily blinked at her master for a few moments. Both of them did some morning stretches, then she hopped onto her favorite perch, his shoulders.

“Good morning, master,” she told him, licking his cheek.

Richter smiled, still slightly awed that his familiar could speak aloud now. “Good morning, beastie. Let’s go see what Randy wants.”

The guard stationed outside of his door saluted as he passed, which Richter returned with a smile and a nod. The conference room was only a short walk away, down another tunnel that branched off the central chamber that held the Great Seal. Walking into the room, he saw that Randolphus was already hard at work making notations on a piece of paper.

“Morning, Randy.”

“Ah, good morning, my lord. Thank you for joining me.” The stately man stood and bowed to his liege.

“Sit sit,” Richter told him, waving him down. He pulled a chair out and followed his own advice, “Now, what do we need to speak about?”

“First, allow me to congratulate you, my lord. I watched closely, and the new villagers were integrating with the old without any problems that I could detect. Everyone seemed to enjoy themselves in their own way. I anticipate a smooth transition for the freed prisoners into village life. It means we now have several issues which need to be addressed, however.”

“You know, one day, I’m going to walk in here and you’ll say, ‘Everything is perfect and we have nothing to discuss!’ Wouldn’t that be a

wonderful day?” Richter’s grin was full of false hope.

“Ah... yes. Quite droll, my lord. If we could address the matter at hand?” Richter sighed fatalistically and nodded. “Very good. Adding so many people to the village at once is quite a boon, but it does raise the question of resource allocation. Specifically, what responsibilities should be assigned to the three hundred and eighteen new workers. I thought it best to place them in the appropriate roles from the very beginning. I have prepared several documents to that effect. The first shows the work assignments of the old villagers.” His voice grew sympathetic as he handed Richter the sheet, “I have adjusted the numbers to reflect our recent losses.”

Richter nodded at him in appreciation, both for the list and for the fact that Randolphus understood that the deaths of his people was a sensitive subject. Always helpful, the chamberlain had subdivided the document into sections. The first showed those who had a Profession focused on combat. The Spy’s name was missing again, of course.

Combat Professionals (9)			
Warrior	Mage	Ranger	Rogue
Mimi	Sumiko	Ulinde	Hanso
Cath	Quasea		
Ygritte	Zarr		

Wisteria			
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Next came the noncombat Professions. Randy had added in parentheses when a person had managed to Specialize.

Noncombat Professionals (23)		
Scholar Bartle Bea	Enchanter Lord Richter <i>(Essence Specialty)</i> Gloran	Engineer Roswan <i>(Dungeon Keeper)</i>
Chandler Joseph	Soaper Jeremiah	Lumberjack Samuel
Sailor Jerry	Weaver Suen	Miner Borde
Hunter Radil	Smith Krom	Farmer Edging
Cook Takko	Shipwright Shiovana	Maid Tifini
Cordwainer	Carpenter	Alchemist

Wudhous	Zounm	Tabia
Crafter	Herbalist	Courtesan
Burk	Elora	Inara

The number of Professionals in the village was really adding up. It was especially great that they had all sworn fealty and were with him for the long haul. The next list Randy handed over was even more extensive. Randy had put notations under the guards and healers to show how many of the men and women also had magic. Richter felt slightly bad thinking it, but even though he still mourned the loss of so many of his men and women in the goblin raid, he was glad not many of the casualties had included his magi. Casters were just harder to come by than melee fighters. The more he dwelled on his reaction, the worse he felt, but he knew he was right. Even though it might make him a shitty person, thinking this way might just make him a good lord.

He turned his attention to the next list, thinking the title was a bit dickish, though accurate.

Amateurs (413)		
9 researchers	4 Dark mages	4 Earth mages

82 farmers and livestock caretakers	18 villagers to care for children	6 gardeners
15 hunters	7 smiths	13 cooks
8 fishermen	8 weavers	10 builders
12 miners	2 shipbuilders	2 skath trainers
84 meidon sprite fighters	61 guardsmen <i>28 biomancers</i> <i>23 aeromancers</i>	12 healers <i>10 biomancers</i>
41 manual laborers	11 washers	4 alchemists

The last chart on the page showed villagers who didn't actively contribute to the village and why.

Nonworkers (249)			
122 Children (<14 years)	24 Elderly	92 meidon pixies	11 Misc

The 'nonworkers' were children who would one day be active villagers and elderly who were too old to do a full day's work. There were

also some who couldn't work for other various reasons. Even Life magic couldn't reverse some chronic conditions, apparently. The two lists added up to six hundred and ninety-four souls. The next page Randy handed over was the breakdown of the new villagers. The first thing shown was how many adults and children there were. Sadly, no elderly people had survived the goblin's captivity. The chamberlain had also broken it down by race. For some reason, there were an inordinate number of elves.

	Human	Sprites	Elves	Dwarves	Gnomes
Adults (317)	83	55	101	12	66
Children (42)	14	11	5	4	8

“This is great Randy, but how does it help exactly?”

“Ah yes, my lord, this next page may be more useful.”

The chamberlain handed over another sheet that showed anyone that had a skill rank of *apprentice* or higher. Unsurprisingly, there were more than a few miners that had hit *apprentice* rank while working in the goblin mines, though only Enalise had reached *journeyman* level and gained the Miner Profession. She also had the Crafter Profession. Several of the other

new villagers also had Professions: Jeweler, Bowyer, Trader, Painter and one Troubadour.

The last Profession was apparently similar to a Bard. Bards, however, were considered to be a combat Profession and had Talents that could be extremely useful in battle. In light of that, Bards had to have a minimal personal level of twenty. Troubadours apparently were noncombat Professionals and only required a personal level of ten to go along with a *journeyman* rank in Singing or some other musical skill.

“They all swore fealty last night, right?” Richter asked. He’d used *Analyze* on everyone that had approached the stage at the party, but after using it on hundreds of people it was hard to remember every detail.

“They did, my lord,” Randolphus affirmed.

“Good. Make sure every one of our villagers is present at the noonday meal today. The six Professionals from amongst the new villagers will get a Quickening fruit over lunch and I want the village to see it. I also plan to try and awaken Air and Life magic in everyone who swore fealty last night.”

“Only those who pledged themselves to you?” Randolphus asked. It had been Richter’s practice in the past to try and awaken the magic of everyone in the village, not just those who had bent the knee.

“Yes,” Richter asserted firmly. “We are growing. That means the one-hundred-percent-free ride is over. It is time that people see that there are clear benefits to loyalty.”

“At your command, my lord.” Randolphus said with a bow of his head. He was actually quite happy with the pronouncement. In his opinion, Richter had been too free and kind with his subjects. People needed a leader to be bigger than life, not a friend that they could share an ale with. “That brings us back to the main question. How would you like to allocate the work assignments for the new villagers?”

“As far as the Professionals, have the Jeweler look at our entire stockpile in the treasury and see if there is anything he can do. We have several uncut gems that he might be able to improve the value of, but I want him under guard the whole time. We won’t be showing these new villagers blind trust no matter what they vowed, not for quite a while. The Bowyer should be very helpful. We only have those clunky crossbows now. Get a list of whatever she needs and put her to work. The Painter and Troubadour I will leave to your discretion. If they can do things to raise the mood of the village though, I’ll consider that time well spent. As far as the Trader, it’s time we start offering our people a chance to spend some of the coin I’ve been paying them. After the Townhall is built, one of the next projects I want completed is a Market. We can sell some luxury goods, and it will also give

people a chance to sell items gained from the Dungeon. See if the Trader is interested in growing that operation. And please get a list of what Enalise can make with her Crafting Profession. If she has any suggestions regarding our mining operations, tease those out as well. Also stress that I want all of the Professionals to test the other villagers, adults and children, to see if they have sufficient affinity to awaken a new skill.”

“As you will, my lord.” Randolphus made several notations on a piece of paper. “And the others? It might be a good idea to assign more people as hunters and fishermen.”

Richter considered the man’s words before shaking his head slightly. “As far as everyone else, guide them where you will, but the emphasis needs to be on increasing our fighting force. Ideally, one to two hundred of the new villagers will join the guard. After that, building up the village infrastructure, meaning getting more people with the Construction skill, is the main priority. Once those two needs are met, I really want to increase the number of researchers, smiths and alchemists. What do you think?”

Randolphus shuffled through his papers until he found the one he wanted. He actually found it rather quickly, but was sighing internally, so he kept flipping through pages while he came up with a plan to make his liege see sense. “I believe that is excellent reasoning, my lord... as always, but we need to ensure that basic needs are met. The primary three are food, water

and shelter, all of which are covered on this page.” The chamberlain handed over a sheet of paper. “Water is no problem, of course. Even if we were besieged, the lake and waterfall mean we will never overwhelm capacity, unless we have massive population growth, of course.

“You are already aware that shelter is an issue, my lord. Our population is greater than one thousand now, though that does include the pixies who obviously do not need housing. Not including them, we need to house approximately nine hundred and sixty people. Each longhouse can, at capacity, provide that for ninety people, but that will be *overcrowded*. Over time this will lead to drops in Morale and possibly even disease, adversely affecting the Health of the village.

“Our goal should be for each longhouse to hold no more than sixty at a time, allowing it to provide *adequate* housing. In an ideal situation, the longhouses would hold only thirty. This would allow those residing within to gain the *comfortable* perk, which can have many benefits including increased Loyalty, Morale, Productivity, and-”

“Population Growth?” Richter asked with a side smile. “Always easier to seal the deal with less eyes around, am I right?”

Randolphus sighed expansively, but nodded, “Yes, my lord.”

“That means, including the five longhouses that we already have, we

need, at minimum, another six. In a perfect world though, we'd have thirty-two. Is that about right?" If his math was correct, it explained why he'd gotten the warning for the available housing falling below 50% of his population's needs. The good news was, he only needed to have one longhouse built to avoid the penalties associated with the 50% warning. Not that he planned to do the bare minimum.

"That is correct, my lord, though now we must speak of building resources. So far, the longhouses have been built only of wood. It is less durable than stone, of course, but for expedience, I recommend we continue this policy in the short term. The current design that we use requires fifty units of wood to create a single longhouse. For simplicity's sake, let us say that each tree felled can create two units of wood once split longitudinally. This varies from tree to tree due to size, as I am sure you understand, my lord, but it is a safe approximation. Thankfully, you summon a large amount of mist workers on a daily basis. This greatly increases the speed at which the village is able to harvest wood. At present, we have two hundred and fourteen felled trees that can be turned into four hundred and twenty-eight units of wood with little difficulty or time expenditure."

Hmmm, Richter thought. "We have enough wood to make eight longhouses, provided we don't need the wood for anything else. Is there a way to improve the yield of the trees we chop down? To make trees provide

more functional units?”

“Yes, and I have already spoken with our new Professional Lumberjack. He is amenable to purchasing a Talent that lets him make rough boards from felled trees. At the first rank of the Talent, he will be able to make a felled tree produce three units of wood, instead of two.”

“Not bad,” Richter replied nodding. “We can increase our stockpile by 50% right there.”

“Yes, my lord. The best option would be to build a Lumbermill, however, so that each tree can be made into finely milled planks. If we had that, each tree could make four, six or even eight units of wood. Unfortunately, we do not have the blueprints to make such a building.”

“Alright, so that’s water and shelter. Doesn’t seem like either will be a big deal. What about food?”

“For convenience’s sake,” Randy handed him another piece of paper, “I have quantified one “unit” of food as what is required to sustain one person for one day. Again, this is a simplification. Children eat less than adults, but our fighters also eat more than the researchers. Again, on average the measurement makes sense.” Richter nodded to show that he was following along.

“Thankfully, we are blessed in that department as well,” Randolphus

continued. “The Quickening increases the yield of our resources by 25% and the perk from your Life Mastery increases the growth rate by 30%. Even better, Isabella’s spell, *Virol’s Blessing*, has the potential to further increase the yield of our crops by up to 100%. This is especially beneficial because, as you know, we lost most of our crops in the bugbear attack about seventy days ago, as well as a good number of our stores.

“The good news is that we have more than made up for those losses in the months since. Currently, the village has five basic farms. They each cover one-by-one-mile areas. One farm can make enough food to feed five hundred people for half a year. I must again remind you, my lord, that this is all an approximation as some crops grow better or worse in certain conditions. There is also great variability in the number of days in each of the fourteen months of the year, but it is close enough to serve our purposes.

“Forty-five days ago, Basil brought back enough rations to feed five hundred people for six months, or approximately ninety thousand units of food. Before that, not including the livestock, we still had eleven thousand and seven units of food. Since that time, we have eaten thirty-two thousand, six hundred and eighty-four units. It would have been less,” the chamberlain fixed him with a slightly judging glare, “but the many feasts you call for consume two to three times as much food as a regular meal.”

Richter just fixed him back with a glare. The damn chamberlain was

always trying to kill the fun!

“Carrying on, my lord. We have unfortunately also experienced some losses due to pests. The burrower rats were able to destroy another twelve thousand seven hundred and eleven units of food.”

“What?” Richter asked in shock. It had been a bit of a mystery why the vermin, normally only seen deep in the earth, had come so close to the surface. They had been able to bypass the normal repel vermin charms that people of The Land used. He’d found a workaround a week later, but apparently, the little buggers had still made a serious dent in the village’s stores.

He shook his head, partly in self-recrimination. He’d been told that about twelve percent of the food stores had been lost, but since there were still bringing in more every day, he’d basically put the matter out of his mind and let Randy handle it. He realized it was time to start taking a more active role. Heaving a big sigh, he said, “Thank you for handling all of this in the past. I’m going to do better about helping you out, man. Where does this leave us now?”

Randy smiled at him appreciatively, “Thank you, my lord, I appreciate that. In answer to your question, after the losses from the burrower rats, and including the losses due to a lack of an appropriate storage

area-”

“What losses?” Richter asked, irritated that there had been more waste.

Randolphus didn’t take it personally. He’d given enough bad news to rulers to know what to expect. “Right now, the food is being stored in generic shacks, and there still aren’t enough of those. Without a proper storage area, we are losing 1-3% of our food stores each week to rot and degradation. We have lost another fourteen thousand three hundred and twenty-eight units in the past six weeks. With all of this taken into account, there were forty-one thousand two hundred and eighty-four food units left from our stores before the raid on the goblin settlement.”

Richter took a piece of paper from the chamberlain and did some calculations of his own, “What you’re telling me is that in just forty-five days, we burned through... almost 60% of all of our food. That was with a population of about seven hundred people.” Randolphus nodded. “And now I just added another three hundred and fifty-nine mouths to feed.” The enormity of the problem was beginning to dawn on him.

“Yes, my lord,” Randolphus replied. He was happy that his liege was finally taking a direct interest in these matters. “To further complicate this issue, we have been providing food for Hisako’s army of several hundred

over the last few days. In the past five days alone, we have consumed another six thousand and fifty-two units of food.”

Seeing the panic rising in Richter’s eyes, the chamberlain finally took pity on him. “The situation is not as dire as you may think, my lord. The pixies, who account for about one hundred members of our village, do not require any food to be provided. They subsist somehow on the energy from the Quickening. The sprites have also been hunting the surrounding countryside. A definite plus to having Lady Hisako’s army stationed nearby is that the surrounding area has been almost free of monsters for the past few days.”

“What about our own hunters?” Richter asked.

“That,” Randolphus began, handing him another sheet of paper, “was my next topic. Each hunter brings in varying amount of food based on luck and their skill level. Will you be opening up the Dungeon to farm animals?” His tone made it clear how he felt about the last question.

Richter had thought about it, “I don’t want to if I don’t have to. I heard what you said before about it slowing down the Dungeon’s growth if it can’t reabsorb slain monsters. I will if I have to though. Feeding our people is more important than anything else.”

The other man made a notation, “It is good to have that option. As of

now, however, each hunter brings in twenty units of food each day on average. Occasionally they take down a bear or moose, which equates to five hundred to eight hundred units, but this does not happen often. There are also days that they catch nothing. The increasing number of monsters around the village are also depleting the game. The rising levels of ambient mana from your awakened Powers attracts both predators and prey, but even the herbivores are having increasing levels which makes them harder to take down. Despite these difficulties, out fifteen village hunters, they have been averaging two thousand two hundred units of food per week. Now that we have a Professional Hunter in the village, that number may go up.

“Our fishermen provide less food than our hunters in a day, but they do so more reliably. Each fisherman produces around ten units of food every day. With eight working to plumb the river, they have averaged five hundred to six hundred units of food a week. Their efficiency is not just due to their skill in Fishing, but also what waters they have access to. As of now, they are forced to work the river. The lake in the northern meadow is extremely plentiful, and could greatly increase the amount of fish they can catch on a daily basis. I agree that keeping all nonessential personnel away from the crystal garden and the skath cage is a good idea though.”

Richter thought back to when thousands of fish had swarmed him in the lake, and knew that Randolphus was telling the truth. If things got dire,

then he'd ease restrictions on who could access the meadow on a daily basis. Right now though, he was hearing that each hunter could feed about twenty people a week and each fisherman could feed ten. The fishermen fed less, but on the other hand, fishing entailed much less risk than prowling a monster-infested forest looking for game. He did a few quick calculations.

Hunters: 2200 units/week x 6.5 weeks = 14,300 units

Fishermen: 550 units/week x 6.5 weeks = 3,575 units

Total garnered food = 17,875 units of food

"Do these numbers check out?" he asked.

Randolphus took a look, "Yes, my liege. I must say that it is refreshing to serve a lord with a basic understanding of mathematics."

Richter just eyeballed him. That math hadn't been hard, and with Randy's aristocratic accent it really wasn't easy to know when the guy was making fun of him, so he just said, "Thanks."

"Indeed, my lord," Randolphus replied with an enigmatic smile.

"Okay, so with what the hunters pull in, we have about fifty-three thousand units of food as of this morning?"

"There is, unfortunately, one more factor to consider, my lord."

"Of course there is," Richter responded, now genuinely annoyed.

“Yes, sir. The care and maintenance of our livestock require grains that also detract from our reserves.” He handed over yet another sheet of paper.

Mist Village Livestock		
Animal	Individual Requirement	Total Requirement
2 plough horses:		
<i>1 stallion</i>	35 units/week	87.5 units/week
<i>1 mare (1 pregnant)</i>	52.5 units/week	
25 sheep:		
<i>2 rams</i>	1 units/week	30.5 units/week
<i>17 ewes (17 pregnant)</i>	1.5 units/week	
<i>6 lambs</i>	0.5 units/week	
136 chickens:		
<i>4 roosters</i>	0.3 units/week	31.65 units/week
<i>71 hens</i>	0.3 units/week	

61 chicks	0.15 units/week	
58 pigs:		
3 boars	01 units/week	65 units/week
37 sows (32 pregnant)	1-1.5 units/week	
18 piglets	0.5 units/week	
11 carnasids:		
11 piglets	0.25 units/week (grain) 0.25 units/week (fresh meat)	5.5 units/week
12 goats:		
2 bucks	1 units/week	17 units/week
10 does (10 pregnant)	1.5 units/week	
15 skaths:		
1 juvenile bull	0 (skaths subsist on fish provided by their caretakers)	0 units/week
14 juvenile cows	0 (skaths subsist on fish provided by	

	their caretakers)	
Total		237.15 units/week

Richter looked over the chart, learning a great deal in just a few moments. One, it seemed like animals consumed 50% more food when they were pregnant than when they weren't. That definitely explained why Ben and Jerry's was always a safe stock.

Two, carnasids were apparently *not* just mean pigs. Richter had had some small success taking animals from the forest to raise, but very few could be domesticated. Except for the skaths, so far, he'd only been able to transition the carnasids into that role. He had thought they were basically pigs, only slightly more dangerous than wild boar, but as long as they were fed regularly, they stayed fairly docile. The fact that they needed bloody meat to stay calm though reminded Richter that even though they were making nice, they were still predators. Danger was always lurking in The Land.

He was just thankful that someone had figured out that the carnasid piglets needed fresh meat along with grains to grow. He wondered what that

might bode for the future, if he kept domesticating monsters. What would the bats need once they fixed the goblin Bat Roost building that had been transported along with the Dungeon? It was an interesting thought.

Another obvious point that leaped out at Richter was that animals were expensive! Two hundred units of food was literally enough for a man to live on for almost half a year in The Land's weirdo fourteen-month system. These creatures were eating that much each week! Still, when he thought about how much joy eating burgers brought into his life, he knew it was all worth it. Daddy needed his medicine! Even if he didn't, eggs every morning was in the contract he'd signed with Roswan when the man had first sworn fealty.

As irritating as it was to have to factor one more thing into his calculations, he was still immensely grateful that he had someone as diligent as Randolphus to catch these kinds of details. Mama had been completely right when she'd introduced the two of them in Yves. Richter would have been lost without the man. Whatever past the chamberlain had, and whatever had earned him that *evil* alignment, was ameliorated in the chaos seed's opinion by all the good he had already done for the Mist Village.

"Is there anything else that is draining our food reserves?" Richter asked. As much as he appreciated Randy, he'd be damned if he'd do another round of math just to hear that gremlins were stealing food every night or

some other such nonsense.

“No, my lord,” Randolphus responded with a faint, knowing smile.

“Why aren’t we adding meat from the animals?”

“We do butcher them when you request, my lord, but I believe it is the best course of action to build up the herds. Next year we should have enough of a surplus that we can utilize them without worrying about depleting that resource.”

“Speaking of which, I see that most of the females are pregnant.”

“Yes,” Randolphus replied, nodding. “I can only think that it is because of the boon from your Life Mastery.”

Richter nodded. His Bounty of Life ability apparently didn’t just increase the rate at which any offspring grew by 30%, but also the birth rate. This could perhaps explain why so many of the village women were starting to sport baby bumps, but Richter would be damned before he pointed out that those women were eating more than normal too. Of course, there were also boosts to Population Growth that came both from the village’s elevated Morale and Health. It did still raise a question that had been at the back of his mind for a while though, “Are the animals giving birth faster than they normally would?”

“No, my lord,” came the slightly amused response. Richter breathed

a sigh of relief. While he was all about growing the Mist Village, he had not been super excited about women getting pregnant then zooming along to delivery 30% faster. It might be paranoia, but he shuddered when he thought about pregnancy hormones being compressed and amplified because pregnancies were shortened. When you also factored in that hundreds of women might be pregnant all at once... well, there wasn't enough chocolate in the universe to deal with that perfect storm of fury. If it had turned out that way, monsters might have avoided the village just out of fear and self-preservation, but Richter still didn't think it would have been worth the cost!

The fact that there might always be a great number of women pregnant at the same time still filled him with a small amount of nervous energy though. Growing up with two sisters, a female cousin, three aunts and a mom that all liked to congregate at the house had taught him the wisdom of staying outside as long as possible. Suddenly, Richter saw a great deal of extended hunting trips in his future, and also saw a bunch of villagers, men and nonpregnant women alike, wanting to go with him.

"My lord?" Randolphus repeated. He'd actually addressed Richter five times in response to the distant look of horror on his liege's face. The chaos seed finally came back to the here and now, shaking himself visibly to banish the waking nightmare.

"Yeah, man. What were you saying?"

“I was merely telling you that the length of gestation appears to be the same, but the rate of impregnation is higher than normal. Also, the animals are growing larger and healthier and approaching maturity faster than would otherwise be expected. While at present they are mostly a drain on our resources, each butchered cow should be able to make five to six hundred units of food when fully grown. We are already benefiting from the milk from the herds, as well as the eggs from the chickens. I believe that while your Life ability explains the high birth rate, their increased growth can be attributed to the level two bonus from the Quickening.” The celestial tree increased the yield of all resources in the village by 25%, as well as making it 25% more likely to find rare resources.

Richter processed the information. Children might grow into adults faster than normal thanks to living in a Place of Power that contained Life magic. That might be disconcerting, but at least there wouldn't be any mega hormones. “Well, even though the animals are draining some of our resources, it's really not all that bad. They can't have eaten more than fifteen hundred units of food. That means our total reserves are... What? Fifty-one thousand, six hundred units?”

“Fifty-one thousand six hundred and forty-seven,” the chamberlain corrected.

Richter made a notation on his scrap paper, “And our current

population is one thousand and fifty-three souls. Taking the pixies out of the equation though removes roughly a hundred people. Let's call it nine hundred and fifty for simplicity's sake. That means..." he did a few more calculations.

950 units of food/day x 7 days = 6,650 units of food/week required to feed my population.

15 Hunters produce 2,200 units of food each week

8 Fishermen produce 500 units of food each week

Cost to feed livestock = 238 units of food each week

Net Food loss each week: $6,650 - 2,200 - 550 + 238 = 4,138$

Total Current Food Stores = 51,647

Weeks Food Stores will last: $51,647 / 4,138 = 12.5$ weeks

"We'll be out of food in three months?" Richter asked.

"Even faster than that, my lord. You are forgetting the loss due to lack of proper storage." Randolphus told him, looking over his figures. "I estimate we will run out of food in ten weeks and five days."

"Then why the hell do you look so chill?!" Richter demanded. The man was just sitting there, calm as a Hindu cow, and the chaos seed was two seconds from yelling at him. Something like, 'How could you let this

happen,' when he realized something. Randy would never have let this happen, which meant that, once again, Richter was missing something. After a moment, he remembered, "Wait, what about the crops?"

"Yes," Randolphus said with a pleased smile. He was doing that head nod that teachers always used when the slow student finally grasped a concept. Personally, Richter had always found it to be a bit smug and irritating. He wasn't about to admit that to Randy at this particular moment though.

"Well, when will the food be ready?"

"Crops typically require four to six months to mature. That means, depending on the climate, farmers may normally harvest one to two crops per year. We lost time unfortunately during the bugbear attack, and all the plants were ruined. In this part of The Land, the planting season is typically only seven to eight months out of the fourteen-month year. We have a shorter season than other areas, especially this close to the mountains. I anticipate the winters will be heavy with snow.

"In truth, without your Bounty of Life ability, we might not have had enough time to maximize a harvest. With the 30% boost to growth speed, however, what would take four to six months will now take three to four, roughly speaking. In addition, the 25% boon from the Quickening, coupled

with the 100% boost from Isabella's spell *Virol's Blessing*, has massively increased the yield of the crops. Having the aeromagi use *Gentle Rain* to always provide water when needed is also a boon.

“One other factor that is weighing heavily in our favor is the mist workers. Each farm normally requires twenty-five to thirty people to maintain throughout the crop cycle. The constructs you summon are able to do a great deal of the manual labor, however. Due to this, each farm only requires twelve or thirteen people with no decrease in yield. The bonuses to village Productivity from our Morale and Loyalty also decrease the number of workers needed to weed, irrigate, remove pests and perform the countless other tasks required to maintain a farm. With the recent boost to Productivity and the fact that we now have a Professional Farmer, we may even be able to allocate some of the farmers to other tasks.”

Richter nodded, impressed. He motioned for Randy to carry on.

“As I said before, each farm can typically produce a crop sufficient to feed five hundred people for half a year. Put another way, each harvest would make one hundred to one hundred and ten thousand units of food. With the boosts to yield, that will come close to a quarter of a million units.”

“That's great!” Richter exclaimed. Even with the increased population, that would be more than enough to get them through the winter,

with a healthy surplus besides. “When will the harvest be ready?”

“Most likely in eighty to one hundred days, my lord. We will also need to muster almost every hand in the village to help pull in the harvest for several days when the time comes.”

Richter’s excitement soured, “And our current food stores will run out in seventy days or so.”

“That is correct, my lord.” Randolphus agreed. He couldn’t help but add, “That is if we forgo any more feasts.”

His liege pinned him with another glare, “Not helping, man.”

In the chamberlain’s opinion, he was being *exactly* helpful, but he kept that to himself.

“This is a problem,” Richter finally realized. “Even if the crop can be ready early, I don’t want to mess around with the ability to feed our people. Even a novice ruler like me knows that’s a good way to create an uprising.”

“We could always halve the food people receive each day, but living on half rations can have serious negative effects upon the Morale, Loyalty, and even the Health of a settlement. As you just stated, ignoring those City Mechanics can have very serious consequences.”

“Yeah,” Richter said slowly and thoughtfully, “I don’t want any part of that.”

“I must also point out that the village’s supply of ale is nearing depletion and that units of grain need to be allocated away from consumption and into brewing if you want to make more.”

Richter quickly straightened in his chair and his voice took on a tone of grave intent. “This just got real, man. We need to deal with this. Now!” He thought long and hard for a minute before suggesting, “What if... what if we allocated some of the new villagers to be hunters or fishermen?”

“An excellent idea, my lord!” Randolphus told him with a magnanimous smile. He took out a sheaf of paper he had already prepared, even while sighing inwardly at how Richter had just “come up with” an idea that he himself had proposed at the start of the conversation. Why were rulers always so much work? Not even just work, they required high amounts of... maintenance.

Yes! Rulers were high maintenance. Randolphus hid an internal smirk, thinking how spot on that description was. The Spy surreptitiously made a notation in the corner of one of his papers so he wouldn’t forget such a perfect turn of phrase. Then he prepared to ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ over any other ideas Richter “came up with” for the next several minutes.

CHAPTER 78 – Day 145 – Kuborn 35, 0 AoC



Randolphus ultimately led Richter to agree to allocating ten percent of the new villagers to either hunting or fishing. That number would give the village a nice cushion against unexpected food needs. No additional farmers would be required as it was too late in the year to start a new crop. Similarly, the livestock didn't need any more handlers than they already had. After finding the best people for fishing and hunting, the remaining new villagers would be heavily encouraged to join the guard and, after that, the construction crews.

They covered a few other topics. The chamberlain had taken the time to assess the personal levels of everyone in the village. When the first wave of colonists had come to the Mist Village, most of the civilians had been level five or below. The guards and former soldiers were more advanced due to the time they had spent fighting, but most of them were still level twelve and below. The hunters had been somewhere in the middle, having levels four to

seven. They gained XP from killing animals, but not quite as much as the fighters gained in battle.

Two events had affected the levels of every one of the villagers, both celestial in nature. The first was the growth of the Quickening. It had given five thousand Experience Points to every single villager, including the children. It had also earned Richter a large number of Relationship Points with every villager because they knew he was to thank for the boost.

That XP had brought even a level one child up to level four and had advanced most of the adult civilians to levels six to eight. The second event had been the birth of Elora and the other celestial pixies. That had given every villager an additional two thousand XP.

Seven thousand experience didn't mean a great deal to Richter, mostly because of Alma's *Brain Drain* ability, but it was the reason that many of the villagers had finally gotten above level ten. That in turn had given them the opportunity to obtain a noncombat Profession. It also required that they be a *journeyman* in a skill, but that had helped them level as well.

Each time someone reached a skill level that was a multiple of ten, they were given a reward in the form of XP. Level ten provided two thousand experience, level twenty awarded four thousand, etc. Anyone who

gained the forty-five skill levels required to be a *journeyman* also gained twenty thousand XP just from the bonuses.

It only took one thousand Experience Points to reach level two, then another two thousand to reach level three, and another three thousand to reach level four, for a total of six thousand. The XP needed to get from eleven to twelve though was thirteen thousand, and to get to level thirteen was an additional fifteen K. The increase doubled every ten levels, until at his own level of thirty-eight it would take a hundred and forty-one thousand experience to level again. When you realized that fighting lower monsters might literally only give one XP each, reaching higher levels was a very daunting task.

Richter had instituted a policy of noncombatants being included on hunting trips and guard patrols. Even if they didn't directly fight, they would still gain experience as long as the group was strike squad-size or smaller; in other words, as long as there were five or less in the party. The final factor in his people's rapid level ascent was Richter's generosity.

The first, and possibly most powerful, potion Richter had ever found was the Potion of Clarity. Each one gave an unprecedented 25% increase to the experience someone gained for an entire day. It might not make a huge difference during just one day of fighting, but if someone was on it when they reached a milestone in skill progression or when they were finishing a Quest,

you could gain thousands of extra Experience Points.

Thanks to all of that, the levels of Richter's original villagers were much higher than would have been expected from commoners. The average level of the civilians, barring the children, was now between six and nine. The hunters had advanced to all fall between levels eight and twelve, while the villagers who had previously been guards had gained a precious level or two and were now almost all between ten and fourteen. Even better, many of the villagers who joined the guard without fighting experience were now nearing levels nine and ten.

The newly freed prisoners, in contrast, were still levels six and below, but while their imprisonment had been horrible, they had been able to practice the same tasks every day, all day, so more than a few of them had reached respectable skill levels, especially in Mining. That skill progression was why their personal levels were higher than the average commoner.

Randolphus also wanted to discuss the state of the treasury. First, he confirmed that Richter wanted the new workers to be paid four silver each fortnight. That was the same wage the old villagers received with a few notable exceptions. The Scholars, for instance, were each making only six silvers a fortnight to offset the rather large price Basil had had to initially pay their guild to buy them out of debt. Randolphus, alternatively, made two gold a month. The man had fought against such a high salary, but Richter

believed in rewarding good work.

The calculations Randy had made showed that Richter couldn't afford to just spend money willy-nilly though. The entire thing was written in the chamberlain's exacting script on pale parchment.

MIST VILLAGE TREASURY	
ITEMS	WORTH (IN GOLD)
2,938 gold 4,691 silver 11,787 copper	3,524.97
Gems	25,000-30,000
Tefonim Jewelry	15,000-30,000
5,234 Kobold Coins	5,234
37 Dark Khan Kobold Coins	*
TOTAL	48,758.97 - 68,758.97 *

Adventuring had been highly profitable. The village treasury was flush! Depending on how much the gems and Tefonim jewelry could sell for, the Mist Village could muster the equivalent of about five million dollars! That wasn't including the Dark Khan coins, for obvious reasons. The ancient coins were magically enchanted to be the answer to an age-old quest. The entire set had to be collected however, something that had not yet been managed. Randolphus had advised not selling them, which Richter had

agreed with. If need be though, any of the Dark Khan coins could sell for between one hundred and tens of thousands of gold. Of course, anyone able to pay that much *might* just kill Richter instead of agreeing to the deal.

The next list on the page showed the village's trade goods. The various ingots of metal the village had could be worth coppers in the case of iron or be almost priceless in regard to elementum. Randolphus had also listed the Potions of Clarity, magical crystal, enchanted weapons and high-quality potions which most likely would be the Mist Village's primary exports. There was also a list of other resources like timber and marbled quartz, but there were obvious logistical problems with moving large enough quantities of those to be worthwhile. They did not have standard prices unlike the items in the first table. Richter also wouldn't even consider selling some items like the rarer ingots of metal.

The next columns showed investments the village had made.

INVESTMENTS
1) Loan to the Company of the White Pearl in the amount of 862 gold to be repaid in enchanted items and books
2) 200 gold loaned to Basil to aid in his diplomatic mission to the dwarf tribes of the Serrated Mountains

Richter had lent a good amount of gold to Hafiz's sons after they had stopped in the village on their way down to the Twins. In addition to securing a 10% discount on all future trades, he had gotten the four young men to agree to purchase magical items and books to fill the library Richter wanted to build one day. The loan to Basil was so that he could buy his way out of trouble and, hopefully, wouldn't wind up eaten by mountain pygmies or some such nonsense.

The last set of data on the page was Richter's least favorite, the dreaded expense report. At this point, the only line items were the salaries he was paying his people. Unfortunately, it added up to quite a bit.

MIST VILLAGE EXPENSES (in gold)	
Salary owed to 160 workers each fortnight (First wave of colonists)	64
Fortnights of salary incurred before arrival of 2nd wave of colonists	4
Salary owed to 329 workers each fortnight (1st and 2nd wave of colonists)	131.6
Fortnights of salary owed 329 workers	3
Current salary owed 2 scribes each fortnight	1.2

Fortnights of salary owed scribes	3
Current salary owed to Randolphus per fortnight	1
Fortnights of salary owed to Randolphus	5 (adjusted for wage increase)
Total salary owed to date	$659.4 = 256 + 394.8 + 3.6 + 5$
Amount owed to families of slain workers: 9 slain in bugbear attack 1 lost in skirmish with scouts 3 lost in battle with goblin witch doctor 46 lost in raid	$790.6 = 59 \text{ slain} * 4 \text{ silver per fortnight} * 33.5 \text{ fortnights in calendar year}$
Hard currency available	3,524.97
... less salary owed to date ... less death payouts	$2,074.97 = 3,524.97 - 659.4 - 790.6$
Current salary owed to 646 workers + scribes + Randolphus, each fortnight	$258.2 = 256 + 1.2 + 1$
Fortnights remaining in first year	26.5
Coin needed to pay out debts at end of first year	$8,292.3 = 659.4 + 790.6 + 258.2 * 26.5$
Total coin on hand (hard coin + kobold silver)	8,680.97
Fortnights of hard currency remaining before needing to use	8

Kobold Silver	
Coin (remaining)	$388.67 = 8,680.97 - 8,292.3$

“These numbers are right?” Richter asked, already sure of the answer.

“Yes, my lord,” Randolphus affirmed.

“Well... shit,” Richter said quietly. In the back of his head, he’d been wondering why every ruler in history didn’t just try to own everything like he was doing. This was why. For all the awesome benefits he’d enjoyed, an entire village fueling his Profession for instance, this was the downside. It was frackin’ expensive!

The way things were going, the village would be out of cold currency in ten months. It wasn’t exactly an emergency. The ship Shiovana was building should be ready soon, so they could start trading, which should help the village coffers. This, at least, was an area that the village was sitting pretty in. At least, that was what Richter thought until Randolphus handed him the next sheet of paper. Reading it, the chaos seed’s heart sank.

APPROXIMATE MATERIAL COST OF PORTALS	
Novice	11,000 gold
Initiate	28,000 gold
Apprentice	126,000 gold

“Before you ask, my lord, these are just rough estimates, but I have studied the documents you made about the portals. A *novice* portal alone requires ten pounds of refined gold. Each pound costs two hundred gold crowns and that is not the only expensive resource. If the list you wrote down is correct, *initiate* and *apprentice* portals require even more rare resources.”

“Well, I made two lists,” Richter added hopefully. “The second list had less expensive material options.”

“I used the second list,” Randolphus answered gently.

“Goddammit,” Richter cursed under his breath. Slapping both hands to his face, he slowly dragged them downward. “So even with all the money we have, even with all the adventuring I’ve done, I *still* don’t have enough coin to build even a *novice* ranked portal?”

“No, my lord, not if you intend to pay the wages you promised your people. To be clear, I highly advise that we follow through with that promise. The consequences of reneging would be severe, and quite possibly deadly. You are also only viewing the cost of building a portal here, my lord. Keep in mind, you will need to build receiving portals in other locations.”

“Hisako said she’d cover the cost of building one at the Hearth Tree, but still, you’re right. We have to find a way to make more. I know the portals will be a huge boon for us, and will definitely pay for themselves many times over, but this initial cost...” he trailed off shaking his head.

“There is the Dungeon, my lord, but only so much can be gained if you continue to restrict your people from farming it.”

Richter looked up at him, “You’re suggesting I allow more people to go inside?”

The chamberlain shrugged, “I know you want to protect your people, and I believe this is an admirable trait. You are their lord, however, not their father. You must allow your people to grow, even if that risks their safety.”

Richter thought long and hard about it, until finally responding, “I won’t let anyone without combat experience in. I won’t let the Dungeon grind them up. But... but anyone that knows the risks, agrees to pay the village their cut *and* is approved by either Terrod, Caulder, Sion or Kentyiro can enter in a five-man squad.” He shook his head. Richter had no illusions that he hadn’t just signed the death warrant of some of his people.

Randolphus was right though. He needed to think about the needs of all his people, of all one thousand and fifty-three souls that relied upon him for safety. It was time he accepted that blood would be needed to grow his

kingdom, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

There wasn't too much else to say after except... "Wait, you ... I did include all the gold I found in the cave with the dark aberration, right?" Richter asked.

The chamberlain's eyes lasered in on his liege like a cobra about to strike. His voice was deceptively calm, "What gold, my lord? If you had anything else to add to the village finances *after* I have spent countless hours trying to find a way to stave off financial ruin, that would be *quite* helpful to know. Is it a large amount?"

In his heart, Richter knew this was one of those times where there just wasn't a right answer like, 'Why were you staring at my sister?' or 'What's that spot on your dick?' so instead he pulled a large satchel out of his Bag of Holding and pushed it towards Randy. The chamberlain just tapped his pen against the side of his clipboard for long moments before setting both down and opening the bag. When he saw the gold bars inside, he closed his eyes and threw his head back as if he was praying for strength.

Finally, he looked at his lord again, "You do realize that each of these bars is worth one hundred gold coins, yes, my lord?" Randolphus pinched the bridge of his nose, "There are twenty-one bars in this satchel. A veritable fortune."

Richter plastered a smile on his face, “Nice to have a little breathing room, huh?”

The chamberlain let out a long-suffering sigh, “Quite, my lord. In the future, if you could make me aware of resources earlier...”

The chaos seed nodded magnanimously, “Anything I can do to help.”

Randolphus had to stifle an eye roll. Straightening his papers, he asked to take his leave, but there was one more item that Richter needed to address. “Randy, I know that I couldn’t do this without you. I think it’s high time we made your position more official. Since I leveled in my Administration skill, I can assign someone to act in my stead. Will you become my Town Administrator?”

“I was hoping that you would ask, my lord,” Randolphus said with a bow. “I am honored. There may be a problem with that, however.”

Unfortunately, the Universe seemed to agree.

*The lack of a Townhall prohibits you from assigning a **Town Administrator**.*

Richter was thoroughly tired of the lack of a Townhall cramping his style. Hopefully, it would be done soon though. The two men left the room and walked down the hall. Once they reached the central chamber, they saw Hisako, Sumiko, Yoshi, Sion, Terrod and Caulder standing over the Great Seal. Richter ordered the other guards to wait outside the Catacombs. He

wasn't sure what was about to happen, and he had secrets that he didn't want the whole village to know about.

Richter quickly repeated the story of the kindir sepulcher for everyone, and told them that it was time to check the memory that he had gained from the Death Knight. He also warned them that the last time he'd had a memory involving the lich lord, that creature had been able to detect his presence.

"How do you plan to protect against that happening again?" Sion asked.

"About that," Richter responded. He sent a mental call to Alma, who flew down to hover in front of him. He looked around at everyone assembled, "Now just stay calm, guys. This might look a little weird." Then the Messeji began.

Twin beams of glacial blue-white light flowed from Alma's eyes into his own. He could feel how excited she was to join with her master once again. Their thoughts flowed together, becoming more in the process yet still somehow distinct. Her body turned into pure psychic energy, and those with him in the cavern had to look away from the blinding light. His own muscles and bones shifted. It felt a bit easier this time; his body seemed to almost welcome the change. His skin thickened to scales, his fingers became talons

and his face lengthened to a draconian snout. Once again, while Richter felt like it had taken long seconds, it was only an instant in the eyes of his audience.

Everyone looked at him in surprise and shock. Terrod had even taken a step back and was holding the hilt of his sword. A sharp-toothed smile crossed Richter's draconian face. It was the exact response he'd been looking for. The chaos seed chuckled at his own joke and then marveled at the fact that he sounded exactly like Muttley when he laughed. That made him think about how Dick Dastardly had always been a dick... obviously.

Focus, master!

What... Right! he thought back. Then speaking aloud, his voice hissed out, "Get ready."

"For what?" Sion asked

"Exactly," was the only answer Richter had.

After forming his mental defenses and entering his mindscape, he visualized the memory. A three-sided pyramid popped into existence. It was made of semi-clear, purple-black light and was surrounded by a neon-green aura of eldritch energy. It hovered outside his castle, forty feet off the ground and twenty feet away. Richter looked up at it from where his avatar stood atop the battlements of his mental defenses. Alma landed on the crenellation

next to him, once again the size of a large dog. He smiled at his familiar's avatar and laid his hand on her warm, scaly neck. As prepared as he would ever be, he accessed the memory.

*Congratulations! You have captured a memory from a **Ghast Soul Eater**. This memory can only be accessed for the next fourteen hours and twelve minutes before dissolution into the ether. Do you wish to access this memory? Yes or No?*

Richter selected "Yes," and another prompt appeared.

*Living through this memory will be instantaneous in regard to your timeline. Due to the presence of your mindscape, however, you may now also view this memory remotely. If you choose this second option, time will pass commensurate to the time dilation of your mindscape. Which do you choose, **Direct Experience** or **Remote Viewing**?*

Curious, Richter chose "Remote Viewing."

To his surprise, his mindscape didn't disappear. The only two times he had done this before, his consciousness had been drawn into the memory itself. That was probably the default "Direct Experience" option. He had felt the actual sensations and feelings of the decaemur knight and the goblin Witch Doctor. This time, the pyramid just started to spin and revolve in multiple directions at once until it was moving so fast it looked like a sphere.

Then, from the heart of the illusory globe, an image formed. Richter quickly realized he was seeing the memory perspective of the Death Knight, but he instead of being held hostage by it, he was watching a 3D movie. While the memory was starting to “play,” he found he could even switch his view to still be aware of his physical surroundings and everyone standing with him at the Great Seal.

Marveling at the change, Richter wondered what other opportunities this afforded. Could he pause the memory? Even rewind it? No sooner had he thought that than four symbols appeared on the spinning disc. They were VR movie symbols! One was two overlapping arrows pointing backwards, the next a large “play” triangle, followed by two vertical lines for “pause” and then a “fast forward.” Somehow his mind had conjured these familiar icons to aid his manipulation of the memory. The fact that Richter needed such infantile tools to manipulate his own mind might have bothered someone else, but the chaos seed wasn’t about to be brought down. This was cool!

A prompt appeared in his vision. Richter pushed *pause* on the memory, and then read it.

Congratulations! Your foresight and preparations have served you well. Due to erecting mental defenses first, you have learned that the pull of captured memories can be resisted. You may now review the memories

gained from Brain Drain without actually living through them. This greatly protects your mind from potentially dangerous Mental energies. You may still live through the actual memory if you choose, but as before, this will degrade the memory and cause it to vanish. Observing it remotely allows you to view it multiple times until the 24-hour time limit has elapsed.

“This is what you have been doing?” Alma asked. Her hissing voice had a dangerous undertone.

Richter was still so geeked out about not having to actually suffer through whatever this memory might involve that he didn’t pick up on the obvious warning signs that there was an angry woman within striking distance. Instead, he just spoke to her in a tone of happy surprise, “I had no idea I could watch the memories this way. I might miss one or two details from not actually living through it, but this also means I won’t have to deal with whatever pain or other horrible sensations that person went through. I’ll take it!”

“Good for you, master!” Her response was overly animated and encouraging this time, the emotions easily detectable even with her sibilant voice. The angry undertone was completely gone. The fact that she was so cheery should have been another warning sign but, unfortunately for Richter, he had missed the first signal and so didn’t catch this one either. His oversight in this case was completely understandable, but sadly, that fact

wouldn't save him. Alma had skipped the second level of Woman Anger, *Yelling*, and had progressed all the way to the third level, *Sweetness*. A stage also known as 'the honey trap.'

She continued in the same loving voice, "It is almost as if there are benefits to erecting mental defenses before you plunge your mind blindly into the memories of a dead man." She snaked her head to the left to glare at him.

Richter finally heard the train whistle. Rather than wisely leaving the tunnel though, he instead opted for the often-regretted 'I'll just talk shit to the train' strategy. Looking at her sourly, he mumbled, "You don't have to be a dick about it."

"What?" she shrieked. "What!" she shrieked even louder. Richter's foolish choice to challenge her skyrocketed Alma all the way to level six of Woman Anger, *Supersonic Death Goddess*. "You have been exposing yourself to the memories of undead, creatures that are essentially evil incarnate, without mental defenses and without me! Living through a memory can have the same consequences as living through the acts themselves. You could have been exposed to energies that your mind couldn't endure! You could have died! Or worse, your mind could have been fractured!

"Even if you died and were resurrected, you have no idea if those

mental wounds would have healed! Since I have gained this level of consciousness, I have come to understand how rare you are, master. No other creature I have observed has gained so many powers so fast, but you are still mortal! If you continue to play with forces and magics beyond your control without taking precautions, you will kill yourself. You just might take me and everyone else you love with you. After we are gone, even if you come back you will be alone, my love.”

Her verbal attack had begun as a fiery tempest, but her last words were more of a sorrowful entreaty. His heart aching from the love in her voice, Richter reached out a hand and rested it on her head. She was a lot bigger in the mindscape, more of a great dane than a cat, but she was still his soul familiar.

Her voice almost caught when she spoke again, “If something were to happen to you, I don’t know...”

“Shhh,” he comforted her softly. “In all the worlds, in all the dimensions, across all of space and time, the most unlikely thing happened. We found each other. If we are ever separated, I promise, I will find you again.” He gave her a wan smile and she bumped him with her large head in loving response. Even in the mindscape, time seemed to freeze for a moment as if the Universe stopped to witness his vow.

Richter chuckled, and now with a normal and joking voice, he told her, “Now stop interrupting. We’re missing the movie.” He mentally pushed *play* again.

CHAPTER 79 – Retained Memory



The memory began with Richter seeing a long stone bridge through the Death Knight's eyes. The natural span of stone was suspended over a chasm so deep he could not see the bottom. Nien turned his head forward, giving Richter a view of the grand structure in front of him. It was a terraced pyramid that vaguely reminded the chaos seed of Mayan ruins, but the similarity stopped there. Those South American wonders had been built to honor their gods and reflect their advanced knowledge of astronomy. This structure looked, for lack of a better word, evil.

It was constructed entirely of a grey metal so dark that it was almost pure black. Half-formed arches extended out from it in spots, looking like the segmented legs of an approaching spider. Green eldritch light shone forth from various openings, hinting at dark sorceries taking place within. Liquid oozed out in places, and even this was corrupted. It fell from pipes, pooling like toxic waste, the same sickly green as everything else.

Sharp spires dotted the pyramid here and there. They looked more like stiletto daggers than towers. Some had spikes sticking out of them like the thorns of a cactus, and each of these had a body impaled upon it. A few of the bodies were even still moving, crying out weakly in pain. Richter could hear Nien chuckle to himself as he observed the suffering. The chaos seed was happier than ever that he was remote viewing this memory as opposed to living it directly. He could not imagine the amount of ugly hate required to elicit such a horrible laugh.

A low moan echoed behind the ghastr. He turned his head to look at the other end of the bridge. Richter took a step back in his mindscape in spite of himself. Thousands upon thousands of undead were standing on a field at the end of the bridge. There were dead sprites, humans, elves, gnomes and dwarves. Richter even saw a few beastkin scattered here and there, as well as other races he couldn't identify.

Amidst the sea of four- to six-foot Death creatures, behemoths dotted the landscape. Some were giant humanoids, others were undead beasts of huge proportions, and others were so alien that Richter couldn't even tell if they had a face. The one commonality between them all was the glow of eldritch light. Neon-green power smoldered in the eyes of every undead creature as they stood there, their collective low moans vibrating the air.

The Death Knight didn't react in any way to seeing such a terrible

horde. He was not concerned or surprised in the slightest. He had no more reaction than Richter would at seeing his own guards patrolling the village. Richter interpreted that to mean such an army might normally be positioned in front of the bridge. How would they ever fight through that?

The memory continued, unaffected by Richter's concerns. Nien's gaze returned forward and this time he looked up, giving Richter a view of the one feature actually dominating the landscape. As impressive as the pyramid was, a gigantic statue dwarfed it. It must have been a hundred stories high and featured a four-armed man, two limbs on either side. Three arms held weapons and the fourth was reaching forward as if it would crush anyone daring to look upon it. The face was both stern and cruel. Four towers, almost the same size as the statue, surrounded the colossus in a square pattern. Massive neon-green bonfires blazed atop each tower and the flickering light made the statue's expression even more malevolent.

Despite the fact that Richter was observing a memory, he was still disquieted by the callousness of the gaze. If it bothered Nien though, there was no sign. The ghast continued his walk, sometimes looking around. From the slight echo his plate boots made on the stone walkway, Richter had the impression that everything he was seeing was in a cavern, but when the Death Knight chanced to look up, all that could be seen was gloom.

The natural bridge was only about half a mile long and a hundred

yards wide. Creatures even taller than Nien's nine feet stood guard at the base of the pyramid. They wore cowed cloaks like reapers, their faces hidden from view. Faint green glows issued from the hoods. Five were stationed to the right of the stairs and another five were to the left. Their bony hands didn't hold scythes though. Instead, they all held six-foot-long claymores, the tips resting on the ground in front of them. If not for the faint movement of their robes, Richter might have thought they were statues.

Nien paid them no heed as he strode past, climbing the first steps of the pyramid. He climbed thirty or forty feet until he reached the next level of the structure. Then it was a short walk forward until the next set of stairs. More of the claymore-wielding undead were present, but this time they were flanked by undead holding bows of black wood. Green light glowed in the eye sockets of every creature Richter could see. The ghast continued on.

Each set of stairs appeared to cover the same distance so far as Richter could tell. At the top of each staircase there were open floors and another set of undead defenders. The pyramid was built like a stack of plates, each one smaller than the one below. It made the building wide, but not much taller than a twenty-story building. Every level had a successively smaller number of guardians, but it was obvious that they were also becoming more powerful. By the sixth level, there were ghastrs, revenants, and hulking zombies that must have weighed at least five hundred pounds.

The creatures grew larger and more formidable-looking after that.

Nien ascended the stairs at a brisk pace, not stopping until he came to a small landing off the last stairwell, mid-way between the tenth floor and the roof. There were only two guardians present. Unlike the undead below, these looked like beautiful, though pale, humans. Their skin was so white it could only be described as alabaster. Both wore mage robes, and held wands wreathed in the black energy of Dark magic. They were the first creatures Richter had seen in this place whose eyes did not glow neon green. Instead, they flashed with distaste when they saw Nien. The one on the right pointed his wand directly at the ghaſt's chest.

"If it isn't the maſter's faithful dog, coming to heel when called," he spat. Based on the long fangs Richter ſaw when it ſpoke, he was now fairly ſure what kind of creature he was ſeeing.

Nien's reſponse was laced with ſcorn, "Lucasz. Better to be a guard dog than a bitch like you, do you not think?"

"Watch your tone, creature!" the other vampire ſhouted.

"Or what, Mikaal?" the ghaſt laughed mockingly. "You will drink my blood?"

"I would not ſully my mouth on whatever groſs ſludge flows through you," Mikaal reſponded with a diſgusted ſneer.

“Just your brother’s cock, then?” Somehow the gross, guttural intonations of the ghaſt made the insult even worse when compared to the refined ſpeech of the two vampires.

“Let us end this!” Lucasz spat. Dark energy began to build at the end of the wand.

If Nien was daunted, it did not reflect in his voice. He was juſt as condeſcending and diſmiſſive as before, “Neither of you have the ſtrength or the courage to oppoſe our maſter. You are barely better than thoſe mindleſſ green-eyed ſlaves,” he laughed, waving to the ſea of minions behind him. “No matter what petty feelings you have, it does not change the fact that our maſter gave dominion of your anceſtral Place of Power to me!”

His voice became even more condeſcending, “If I am wrong, uſe your magic and ſtrike me down. You are both vampire maſter magi. You might even ſtand a chance. Show me that you are not juſt hollow ſacs, filled with nothing but impotence and falſe words.” Richter could ſee the ghaſt ſpread his arms wide, as if in invitation. Nien held that poſe for long ſeconds until Lucasz’s arm fell and Mikaal looked away in anger and ſhame. Nien’s laugh was even more deriſive this time, as he ſtrode paſt the two vampires and aſcended the ſtairs leading to the roof.

Richter finally ſaw what was at the top of the pyramid. There was no

roof above and the floor was made from the same giant dark-grey metal blocks as the rest of the pyramid. Directly in front of the ghaſt was a giant ſtone coffin. It floated above the ground, eldritch light peeking out from beneath the grey ſtone lid. Beyond the ſarcophagus, a large wall of rough black rock roſe. Stylized faces were carved into the wall, every one of them with expreſſions of utter agony. The eyes and mouths were holes that pierced the width of the walls, allowing the neon-green light of the tower bonfires to ſhine through. It made the entire wall look like it was a living, ſcreaming monument to pain. A giant face was ſet in the middle and the open mouth was a doorway through the wall.

Again, even though he knew it was only a memory, Richter was ſeriously diſturbed by the ſcene, and Alma even nuzzled her head againſt him for comfort. Nien had no reaction. He juſt knelt before the coffin and waited. Long minutes paſſed before the light coming from the ſarcophagus intensified. The lid ſcraped back with a loud, gravelly ſound. Even though Nien was not looking directly at the coffin, the light grew almoſt blinding as more of the inner radiance was revealed. It flared brighter ſtill before finally ſubſiding. Then, Richter heard a voice he had only heard once before in real life. A voice that had ſounded many more times in his nightmares.

“You have come, my ſervant. This is good.” The lich’s voice was a rasping whisper.

Nien looked upon his master, allowing Richter to do the same. He looked very much the same as the last time the chaos seed had seen him. The master of eldritch magic was not physically imposing. He was a gaunt figure with papery, desiccated skin the color of grey shale. Only two things had changed. The few wisps of white hair that Richter remembered had fallen out, leaving only a disgusting grey pate of wrinkled skin on his head. The other difference was what he was wearing. When he had seen him in Jorgen's memory, the lich had been wearing an unassuming red robe and basic pants. Now he was festooned with opulent jewelry and attired in fine raiment.

Eight bejeweled rings hugged his fingers on both hands and Richter would bet anything they were heavily enchanted. Richter attempted to use his identification Talent but, of course, had no ability to impact the memory of another being. As the lich floated out of the coffin, a black robe with golden runes etched upon it fell into place around the caster. He also wore a crown made of what looked like finger bones with jewels embedded in it at intervals. The most impressive accoutrement was his staff.

It had the fluid look of quicksilver but, rather than a silvery color, it was orange-yellow. The base of the staff was a simple line of metal, but the top was the size of a stop sign. It had three spikes protruding out from it, two to either side and one sticking straight up. The middle was hollow and a

gigantic emerald had been set in the space. It throbbed with eldritch light.

“My master,” Nien intoned, still kneeling. All of his earlier cockiness was gone. The only undertones that remained in his voice were respect and deference.

“Rise,” the lich commanded. It was the same whispering voice that Richter remembered. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, and his skin shivered. The first time he’d heard it, he had felt like a spider was slowly walking across his brain. It wasn’t any better hearing it this time. What made it worse was that even though the lich’s voice sounded wholly unnatural, it didn’t stop an air of culture and sophistication from oozing through.

The Death Knight stood, “I have come as called, my master. How may your humble servant serve you?”

“There is a power awakening. It is... familiar to me. An echo from my living life.”

“From before your ascendance?” He tried to keep the surprise from his voice, but Richter picked up on it easily. The chaos seed could not know the Death Knight’s emotions or thoughts as he was only remote viewing the memory, but Nien clearly had no love for his master. The chaos seed doubted the Death Knight could even experience that emotion. “My lord, I

have been your faithful servant for centuries. In all that time, you have never shared details of your living life. Does this new power pose a danger to you?”

The lich did not answer, but the green lights in his eyes began to smolder a bit brighter. Nien quickly bowed his head, “I meant no disrespect, dark lord. Please forgive me.”

Quiet reigned for several tense seconds before the lich began speaking again, “Nothing and no one can rival my power, worm!” Nien bowed his head in subservience. Silence reigned again. The lich was satisfied by the display of respect, because he continued in a more speculative tone, “It is foolish to ignore any rising power, however. Jorgen, the guardian of the Dark portal has been destroyed. I am sending you to the world above to investigate. You are to discover the nature of this threat and destroy it.”

“By your command, my master. I will gather my army and reclaim the portal.”

“No,” the lich commanded. “I have sent a behemoth slime to lie in wait for whatever army is foolish enough to use the portal and invade my domain.”

Richter could not see it, but Nien grinned. “Wonderful, master! I only wish I could watch the slaughter! How will I return to the surface

without the portal, however? The trip through the tunnels will take many days.”

“I will send you. I cannot guarantee where you will go, but I have been able to sense a concentration of Death magic. My magic will transport you there. Raise an army and lay waste to any living that you find. You will need two objects to accomplish your task.”

The lich reached inside of its robes and handed over a small jar, “This salve will allow you to see in the mists.”

“Mists, my lord?” Nien asked.

The lich stayed silent for a moment. When he spoke, he almost sounded like he was speaking to himself, “I am remembering things that I thought were lost forever. There is a Place of Power above us that may have been claimed. If so, the Master will be able to cast a spell that confuses the senses, even of the undead. Apply this salve beneath your eyes and the eyes of your creatures and you will be immune to the mists that cause this.”

“My master is wise,” Nien fawned.

“Step forward,” the lich whispered, ignoring the false accolade. Nien did so and the mage began to chant. The jewel in his staff began to flash with light. A small finger bone rose from the crypt. It glowed with eldritch magic after a few moments, and Nien’s master drew a dagger from the inside of his

robe. Without hesitation, the mage cut Nien on the neck and placed the bone at the incision site. The ghast did not flinch or pull away. The skeletal finger wriggled like a parasite, worming it way through the Death Knight's eternally decaying flesh. It finally settled under his left collarbone.

“You may now call upon my power, one time and one time only, to help you finish your quest. When your task is done, this bone will also bring you back to my sarcophagus. Heed my warning. You are not trained in the use of eldritch magic and invoking it will cause great damage to your body. With your high health, you will survive and recover, but do not use this item unless you are at full strength. Otherwise, it will destroy you utterly. Also, this magic is extremely taxing and I will only have the strength to send you and you alone, but you should be able to raise undead if the concentration of Death energy is indeed as strong as I suspect.”

“By your will,” Nien responded, bowing his head for a moment.

“Do not fail me. Nevuur is almost in retrograde. It will allow me to commune with Rakshasha, though I must begin marshalling my power now in order to establish the conduit. You will travel to the surface and destroy this threat. Do so before I finish the ritual or I will ask our patron for enough power to scour the surface and you with it.” There was no inflection in the lich's voice as it discussed the death of every living creature in Richter's domain.

“I will not fail, dark lord,” Nien promised bowing again. “I will slay every living creature I find and harvest their hearts in tribute to you.”

“One final question, servant, before you leave to manifest my will. Whom do you serve?” The lich raised its staff and green energy began to surround the ghast.

Nien answered without hesitation, throwing an arm straight out in a closed fist salute, “Singh! Singh the Defiler!”

The lich spoke words of Power, the intonations making Richter’s skin crawl. Green light built around the Death Knight until, with a clap like thunder, he disappeared. The image froze and the light coming from the memory pyramid began to darken.

Richter looked at his familiar, taking comfort in her presence. The memory had been extremely illuminating. He now knew the name of his enemy: Singh the Defiler. The memory had also answered one other thing that had been bothering him. Namely, how the undead had made it from the sepulcher to the kindir settlement without the mists leading them astray.

What he had seen raised more questions than it answered though. How had Singh known about the salve? Richter assumed the awakening Power was his own, but what did it mean that the lich was familiar with it? Had the lich once lived on the surface, maybe even in an earlier iteration of

the Mist Village? Richter already knew that many before him had possessed the mantle of Master of his Place of Power. Could it be even worse? Could the lich-

His musings were interrupted by the sound of panic in Alma's voice, "Master!" Alma cried out.

Richter came out of his reverie to see that the image on the rotating pyramid had begun to lighten again. It was no longer frozen, and he could see the lich's head searching the air around him. The chaos seed tried to "pause" it again, but he had lost control. Then Singh spoke.

"I cannot see you, but I will find you. This is the second time you have spied upon me, and for that affront, I will stretch your soul over a dire flame and torture you for an eon!" the lich's voice was viscous with hate. It began to cast a spell and as it did, the aura of eldritch energy that surrounded the rapidly spinning memory began to thicken and widen. Tendrils of power appeared at the periphery, blindly searching the air around the spinning pyramid. Even though they were not directed, they grew thicker and longer by the second. With a flash of fear, Richter realized they were trying to find him! As the eldritch light grew in his mindscape, the image of the lich was replaced with a dark and bottomless voice. A horrible sucking noise filled Richter's ears and he began to feel a pull. Even as the eldritch tentacles searched for him, the memory itself became a vortex into the abyss!

“How can he do this?” the chaos seed shouted at Alma over the ever increasing sound of the wind.

“I don’t know, but you have to get rid of it!” She launched off the battlement and breathed glass flame on the ropes of eldritch magic.

Richter did as he was told. He tried to force the memory away. It barely budged. Somehow the lich had hijacked the spinning pyramid. He tried to control the green magic, or force it to get smaller, but to no avail. The tendrils of power just grew larger and more numerous even as Alma tried to burn them away. They got closer to him each second.

He didn’t even want to consider what would happen if the lich was able to lay hold of his avatar. It would have direct access to his mind! He pushed and strained for all he was worth, until he realized how foolish he was being in his panic. This wasn’t a real pyramid. It was all in his mind. His mind! If he didn’t want something there, he just needed to-

*Do you wish to discard the memory of **Nien the Reaver** now? Yes or No?*

Richer had never been so happy to see a prompt. He chose “Yes” immediately and the spinning pyramid fractured into millions of pieces, taking the vortex of nothingness with it. The connection between himself and the lich vanished and the tentacles of eldritch power winked out of existence. The particles of memory faded away, leaving no trace that they had ever

existed.

The chaos seed collapsed to his knees, both in his mindscape and in reality, exhausted in mind, if not in body.

CHAPTER 80 – Day 145 – Kuborn 35, 0 AoC



“Are you alright?” Sion asked. He slipped an arm under Richter’s to help him stand. Alma echoed the question inside of Richter’s mind.

“Yes,” Richter hissed, answering them both. His dragon form was significantly heavier than his human body, and Sion wasn’t able to move him until he stood under his own power. “The lich is strong, but I was able to observe the memory remotely this time. I have much to tell all of you.”

You could also just show them, Alma added inside of his mind.

**Is that possible, my love?* The dragonling had the ability to transmit images to others if she made a temporary psychic bond by looking them in the eyes, but Richter had never been able to duplicate the act himself.

I am fairly sure, she told him.

Richter broached the topic to all present. Yoshi immediately looked uncomfortable with the idea of anyone being in his mind. Sumiko, Hisako and Randolphus agreed, however. Terrod said he would if Richter required it and Caulder demurred, saying all he needed to know was what to hit and

when. Sion fixed his friend with a glare though, quickly followed by, “You’re weird all the time and now you’re a lizard... so no.”

“A simple ‘no’ would have been fine,” Richter hissed at him in irritation. Then he made eye contact with the three who were willing, establishing weak mental connections. After that, he replayed the scene, cutting the memory off before the lich became aware of his surveillance. Alma doubted that the eldritch lord could have any power through the memory of a memory, but better safe than sorry. He just verbally related that part to all of them.

The process of sharing the memory went at the accelerated speed of his mindscape, condensing the twenty-minute memory down to just over three real time. All of them had emotional reactions to what they saw. Randolphus looked troubled, Sumiko looked overwhelmed, but it was Hisako’s reaction that was the most severe.

“A Mausoleum!” she spat. Her hands curled into claws of rage and her eyes flashed in anger.

“I believe you are right, Hearth Mother,” Sumiko agreed sadly.

Everyone else looked at each other, at a loss for words. Richter had never seen Hisako have such a visceral and angry reaction. He was about to ask what she meant when the timer on his bond expired. Blue-white light

flowed out of him and his body resumed its normal human shape. Sion looked at the ball of psychic energy that was slowly coalescing back into Alma, completely fascinated. He slowly extended a hand towards it.

Richter slapped his questing fingers, “Dude! Don’t poke my familiar’s psychic energy. It’s creepy!” With an awkward look on his face, the sprite pulled his hand back. Richter turned towards Hisako, “Now, what do you mean by a Mausoleum?” At this point, his ear had become accustomed to picking up when people pronounced things with the special emphasis that denoted a capital letter. He had a feeling he wasn’t going to like this.

Hisako ignored him and instead reached out with her arm. To the chaos seed’s astonishment, her hand seemed to disappear for a moment. When she pulled her arm back, she was holding a large blue parchment.

“How did you do that?” Richter asked, amazed. She hadn’t reached into a Bag of Holding, she had just reached into *nothing* and pulled out an item.

“There is still much you have to learn, young lord,” she told him curtly. Then with a few muttered words of Power, a white glow surrounded her hand. A moment later, a table appeared, formed entirely of sparkling Light magic. She unrolled the large scroll and the chaos seed saw that it

looked like a star chart. There were even angles and calculations drawn upon it. He shook his head. Her casual displays of magic always reminded him of what a large difference in power there was between the two of them.

Sumiko was the one that answered Richter's question, "A Mausoleum is a Core building, much like your Forge of Heavens and Dragon's Cauldron."

Richter's eyes widened in surprise and alarm. Core buildings offered the potential of great power. His own were only the size of a large grocery store though. The pyramid was the size of an airport! "But it's so big! Does that mean it's insanely powerful?"

Sumiko clicked her tongue in irritation, "Humans. Bigger does not always mean better."

Sion snickered, "That's not what your mom said."

Yoshi slapped the back of the younger sprite's head without looking.

"In this case, however," Hisako interjected, ignoring her son's yelp of pain, "you may be correct, Lord Richter." She was still looking down at the chart before her, but she took over the conversation. "A Mausoleum is a Core building created by combining a crypt, a Magic Core, and a relic. It allows whoever controls it to summon large armies of undead and greatly supplements the powers of those Death creatures."

“You’ve come across one before?” Richter asked.

“No,” she responded grimly, shaking her head. “I have a tome in my library that lists hundreds of Core buildings throughout history. It details their powers, level by level.”

I’ve got to get that book, Richter said to himself. Reading hadn’t been a major priority since he’d come to The Land, but more and more he was realizing what a mistake that was. Now wasn’t the time to bring that up though.

“Okay, so the Mausoleum is a bad thing, and it explains how the lich has that giant army. What does it have to do with ‘Nevuur being in retrograde’?”

The Hearth Mother kept poring over the astrological chart as she answered, “You most likely already know that there are seven moons orbiting The Land. What you may not know is that each moon corresponds to one of the Basic Elements. Vidaal is the Life moon, Nevuur is the moon of Death. Torresta is Fire; Aquiel, Water. Caelean is the moon of Air, and Potroq is of Earth. Finally, Tenebrit is the moon of Dark magic.”

Richter had been counting along, “But there are eight Basic Elements. What about Light?”

Hisako looked up from her furious inspection of the star chart with a

slightly annoyed look on her face. The Hearth Mother might have the potential to be sweet and matronly, but she was also the leader that had enacted a strict policy of executions for any non-sprite found in her territory for decades, if not centuries. Seeing that look on her face, Richter was reminded that she wasn't just a cute four-foot redhead, "Can you truly not think of a celestial body that represents Light?" Apparently, she also did not like to be asked idle questions when she was focusing.

It occurred to him a moment later. "The sun," he answered lamely. With a sharp nod of her head, she looked back down at the chart, one finger tracing along a particular celestial path.

Sion snickered behind him and muttered, "Dumbass." He made sure he was nowhere near Yoshi when he said it.

Richter shot him a sharp look and the sprite just looked back with level six smugness and level ten asshole, the kind of ridicule only a best friend can muster. Twisting his lips in irritation, Richter turned his attention back to the Hearth Mother.

Everyone was quiet for a bit, letting Hisako work. A few minutes later, she looked up grimly and pronounced, "We have five days."

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They were supposed to have a full week! That was when the quest he'd gotten from the spirit Krista would expire. The spectral girl had suffered torment for centuries at the hands of her father and the lich lord. Even though Richter had freed her of the rage that had trapped her and other spirits on this plane, the ghosts had decided to delay moving on in order to take revenge on the lich that had tortured them for so long. Krista had given him a coin that would call her and the other spirits to his aid, but had only given him a month to use it. That time limit would expire in seven more days. If she was right, the loss of two days would be a hit to their preparation but still, two days didn't seem like enough to merit her grim expression.

"Five days?" Richter repeated, hoping for some elaboration.

"Yes!" She responded in anger, slamming the table. She closed her eyes and visibly forced herself to be calm. "When you first told me there was an eldritch mage hiding in the tunnels beneath the forest, I knew he had to be

dealt with. What you saw in the memory, however, is something much worse.

“While eldritch users are dangerous, they will ultimately destroy themselves. Their magic is anathema to the natural order; it creates an imbalance in the world around them. Anyone and anything can be corrupted. Even the landscape can be warped. This imbalance ultimately leads to their downfall, as the natural forces of The Land lash out to try and correct the inequity. The eldritch is most assuredly a path to great power, but there is always a horrible price to be paid.

“That is why I did not understand how such a creature could have existed for so many centuries without destroying himself, let alone how he could have escaped my notice for so long. The Mausoleum answers the first question. Somehow the lich has transferred the corruption of his magic to each of his undead soldiers. That sea of undead is shouldering the majority of the imbalance his magic creates. That is not the most concerning part of your vision, however. That statue is an Exile.”

Caulder swore at hearing that, and moved his hand in a way that Richter had seen others do to ward off evil. Terrod’s hand squeezed his sword hilt so tightly that it squeaked. Even Yoshi’s face paled slightly at the announcement.

Richter hated always being the one who didn't know things, but he had to ask, "What's an Exile? Is it some kind of god? I thought the gods had all been banished."

Hisako looked at him with faint surprise, but then shook her head ruefully, "I forget sometimes that you have been in The Land for barely half a year. No, Lord Richter. The Exiles are not gods. The Exiles are the beings that banished the gods."

It was Richter's turn to feel a sinking sensation in his chest. "This thing that the lich is about to commune with is even stronger than a god?"

"In some ways, yes," Hisako responded. Then she told him the story of The Land's creation. How beings of cosmic power had divided themselves into two factions, the Light and the Dark Court. How their war had sundered worlds and caused stars to implode. Then she talked about the final battle, a clash that threatened reality itself. "At that point," she continued, "something happened. I do not know what, but it is said that the Universe itself intervened."

"The Universe?" Richter asked. "Like some guy made out of stars and planets?"

"No," she answered flatly, rolling her eyes. "A consciousness so far beyond any of us that our minds cannot even imagine the concepts needed to

describe it. It is the interconnected energy of every reality at every time that ever was, is, or could have been. The conflict between the two Courts threatened Creation itself, so it responded.”

“How?” he asked.

“By forcing every member of the Courts into a new sliver of reality. A pocket dimension with only one exit. It then slammed the door closed, and locked it with a living representation of every energy and magic that existed. That lock is The Land.”

Richter’s face screwed up in confusion.

“The Land, the magics in it, the life force of the people in it, the very stones themselves, are all part of a magic spell that was created to keep the Light and Dark Courts imprisoned. Our world was created to generate the magic needed to sustain the spell until the end of the Universe. As long as The Land exists, it can power whatever it is that the Universe did to keep the Courts sequestered, and thereby protect every other soul in Creation. That is why the denizens of the Courts want to utterly destroy the world that we stand upon.”

Okay, Richter thought to himself. No pressure.

“Alright, I get the backstory,” he said, “but what are the Exiles and what does that have to do with the lich? If they’re locked away by the

Universe itself, why do we have to worry?”

“The members of the Dark and Light Courts that were locked away continued to war upon each other in the pocket dimension. After a time, however, they realized that they were evenly matched. Killing one member of the Light cost the life of one member of the Dark. Their eternal war was quickly whittling their forces down to nothing. It is not known how long it took, but the two powers came to a detente.

“The members of both Courts, who have come to be known as the ‘Originals,’ began to breed. Their offspring, beings of terrible power and will, were born into the captivity of the pocket dimension. They came to be known as the ‘Exiles.’ These children of the Courts were then used to continue the battle. Exiles are born to be battle fodder for a war that never had a valid purpose and now has even less of one. While the remaining Originals stay above the fray, countless generations of Exiles have been continuously born to fight and die, without end, for all time.”

“So, what? We feel bad for these guys?” Richter asked.

“No,” she answered with a stark expression, “we fear them. While Exiles may not match Originals in terms of raw power, they still possess the might needed to rip Time apart if they were ever set free. Even worse, eons of battle have killed any with a trace of kindness. Those that have survived

are the most intelligent, and the most cruel. Their innate power is now coupled with the viciousness their tormented lives has taught them. Even one Exile, if ever released, could mean an age of sorrow for every living creature and generations of their descendants.”

It was quiet in the room as everyone thought about the enormity of what Hisako had just said.

Hisako looked at Richter, her face deadly serious, “You must understand. No one knows exactly how old The Land is. Even the great wurms of the deep are said to have been born after it was created. What is known, however, is that Cataclysms have shook this world time and again. Horrible events have scoured the entire surface of life, have made whole nations sink into seas, have opened gateways that allowed demons to hold sway over continents for millennia. Each time, however, The Land would overcome these injuries and, in time, heal. This world was personally created by the Universe itself, and it was made to be resilient and powerful.”

“That’s a good thing, right? I mean not about the demons and the... life scouring, but the fact that it always bounces back.”

“It is,” Hisako replied nodding, “but there are ancient repositories of knowledge warded with runes that reach into the very bedrock of The Land. In them are texts that have survived the last several Cataclysms. These

primeval tomes tell of beings of great power. They have been called devils, demons, ancient gods of evil and other words that now only exist in these works. Whatever these beings were called, there was always a central theme. They all hint that each and every Cataclysm was triggered by the whispers of an Exile. They say each of these horrifying chapters of history were attempts to destroy The Land itself and free the Courts so that they may once again spread their evil throughout the stars.”

“If this lich is an Exile worshiper,” Hisako finished, “we cannot allow it to pass energy along to its master or, even worse, receive gifts that would let him destroy us utterly. Because of your ability to access memories, he now knows that forces are being arrayed against him, and if we do not move quickly it could not only kill all of us, every man, woman and suckling child, but kill the forest itself and leave only despair in its wake.” Hisako rested a hand on Richter’s shoulder when she saw the hurt on his face, “I do not blame you for this situation. If you hadn’t accessed the memory we would not know of the trap the lich had set for us. Hundreds of lives might have been lost. We also would have waited a full week, and the lich’s powers might have been augmented by the Exile, again dooming us to failure. You absolutely have saved us, my lord Richter, but it does not change the danger we all face.”

For several seconds, silence reigned over the Great Seal, “I... thank

you for saying that, Hearth Mother,” Richter finally managed, swallowing hard. “I still do not understand how this Exile, Rakshasha, can hurt us if the Universe itself locked them all away.”

“No prison is perfect,” Hisako told him. “Neither the Originals nor the Exiles can directly affect The Land, but they can whisper. There are always those willing to trade their lives, and even their very souls, for power. Though the Exiles were born of the Originals, they are still almost as old as The Land itself. The knowledge and magics they can impart is enough to get many selfish creatures to do their will.

“Knowledge is not the only risk that Exile worshipers pose, however. There is one thing that no prison can stop, and that is energy itself. All that is has been formed out of some type of energy. This is an immutable law. The Exiles are able to gain some small amount of power from the actions of their servants and from the sacrifices they perform. It has also been said that Exiles have, in rare cases, gifted favored servants with some of their own power.

“If you have any doubt as to the danger of their influence, remember one thing that you yourself have already mentioned. There are no gods in The Land. That is because though the gods may have been diametrically opposed to one another, and many were capricious and wicked, they all shared one common trait. A great deal of their power stemmed from their

worshippers and the faith that was placed in them. As the end goal of every Exile and Original is the destruction of The Land, it means that the gods would lose a great deal if that ever came to pass. They might even be destroyed. For this reason alone, the banished gods of this world were often the greatest opponents of any scheme hatched by The Light and Dark Courts.” She fixed him with a poignant stare, “So the Courts banished them from The Land.”

“How?” Richter asked, dragging the word out. Bloodthirsty goblins, rock giants with a grudge, even castrating Assassins he could deal with. He’d been knocked down, tortured and even killed, but each time he had come back stronger and meaner. Every single creature that had challenged him had come to regret it. It was usually their last regret, and the last sight most had seen was his smiling face as he ended them. But what could he possibly do against creatures that could defeat *gods*?

“I do not know,” Hisako answered, shaking her head. “Philosophers and master mages have wrestled with that question for millennia. ‘How’ does not matter, however. What matters is that we destroy the lich before he finishes the connection to his Exile patron.”

“Could he really ‘scour’ all life from the forest?” Richter asked.

“I do not know that either,” Hisako replied with uncertainty in her

voice. Then her face grew steely, and her tone as hard as granite, “What we do know is that the lich believes he could. We cannot take the chance that he is right. That creature must be destroyed.”

“What of this behemoth slime? How dangerous is it?”

“Uhhh, behemoth slime?” Sion asked, not having experienced the memory.

Hisako absently supplied the answer, “Behemoth slimes are amongst the most horrifying of monsters. Almost any slime can consume and, over time, dissolve other creatures. Behemoths do the same, but instead of destroying one enemy at a time, their bodies can flow like a tidal wave and destroy entire regiments. If such a monster is indeed lying in wait, then we cannot use the Dark Portal.”

“Okay,” Richter said blanching. Being drowned and digested in living ooze sounded like one of the worst imaginable fates. “The lich still has to be dealt with though. How are we even supposed to get there?”

Sumiko stepped forward. With an enigmatic smile, she reached into her robe. She pulled out a vial and shook it. It made a faint *clink, clink* sound and Richter could see a small bone behind the glass, glowing green with eldritch energy, “I think I can help with that.”

Richter rushed forward and grabbed the vial. For a moment, despite

all the warnings, he wondered what goodies he could get if he fed the bone to his Dungeon. Eldritch magic seemed quite powerful. A second later, he shook off that thought as ridiculous and addressed the village Healer, “This is the bone that the lich put under Nien’s skin?”

“I wasn’t sure what the significance was when I found it in the ghastr’s body, but now there is no doubt.”

Remembering the second effect of the bone, to bring the Death Knight back to the lich’s sarcophagus, Richter could kiss the Life mage. “Can you trigger the magic in it to get us to the top of the Mausoleum?” he asked excitedly.

“I cannot,” she answered. Richter’s face fell. Then she added, “Only a being already steeped in eldritch magic can use this talisman.” She kept smiling the entire time.

“Why are you-” then it dawned on him. They *did* have access to a being that had been steeped in eldritch magic. She meant the decaemur knight. He still didn’t understand why she was grinning at such a time. If anything, it should make her unhappy that the knight would turn out to be so useful. She and Beyan had almost come to blows over whether he could claim the knight as a pet. Then Richter remembered the lich’s warning to Nien, about how the Death Knight should only use the enchanted bone when

he was at “full strength.” The Death Knight’s health had been nearly a thousand. The decaemur knight’s health was less than half that.

It suddenly became clear why Sumiko was happy. Not only would the decaemur knight be destroyed, but she could mess with Beyan at the same time. Richter sighed heavily, imagining how that conversation was going to go with the Death mage. Hoping he was wrong, he decided to double-check, “So when the decaemur knight triggers the enchantment, it-”

“Will most likely be completely destroyed,” Sumiko finished happily. Apparently, even the threat of an Exile was not enough to steal the Life mage’s joy at sticking it to her gnome counterpart. With a broad smile, she asked, “Would you like to tell him or shall I?”

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“Bloodless, sexless, cow-titted, slag of a biomancer! She is enjoying this!” Beyan shouted, pointing at Sumiko. “Quit smiling at me, bitch! How are you bony *and* fat?”

She just shook her head in response. The innocent expression on her face was completely undercut by the devilish look in her eyes. Her mouth also contained barrels of barely contained laughter. The sprite was enjoying this so much that even the insults of a necromancer couldn’t knock her off her perch, “No, Beyan. I am as sad about this as you are... Really.” She stuck her bottom lip out in a pouty frown.

“She doesn’t mean that,” Beyan complained loudly to Richter, pointing again at Sumiko. With the necromancer no longer looking at her, the sprite elder shook her head at the chaos seed and gleefully mouthed, ‘No. I do not.’

Hiding a laugh behind a cough, Richter tried to look sympathetic,

“She does, man. She does! Either way though, we need you. I need you. The village, your home, needs you. Will you really tell all of us no?”

Richter watched the interplay of emotions across the gnome’s face. He wondered idly if the village’s Loyalty rank of *Trusting* was coming into play. The blurb associated with it had clearly stated that his people would “*begin to put the well-being of the settlement above their own.*” Either way, Richter didn’t plan to take no for an answer. In fact, when Beyan had bound the knight, he had made sure that his own will would override the gnome’s in regards to commanding the undead servant. It would still be better if the necromancer came to this decision on his own though.

After chewing his lip and complaining a few more times, the gnome finally nodded.

“Good man,” Richter told him, clapping the Death mage on the shoulder. “And you never know, your servant might survive the process.” He put a little pressure on Beyan’s shoulder to turn him so the gnome wouldn’t see Sumiko once again gleefully mouthing, ‘Nope.’

Beyan walked away looking absolutely crestfallen. Richter wasn’t too worried. He planned to make the gnome his diplomat to Verget Kunig. That would give Beyan ready access to the undead sepulcher. Not only was Richter sure the gnome would be greatly useful in discovering the full

capabilities of that place, but he was fairly certain the necromancer would be ecstatic to have access to such a high concentration of Death magic.

Richter decided to not share that info until after the battle with the lich though. If he told Beyan now, the little bald man would be running through the forest five minutes later. Putting it out of his mind, he turned back to everyone still present at the Great Seal. While he had been waiting for Beyan to show up, they had all started coming up with a plan of attack. Hisako and Sumiko had spent some time looking at the bone and casting a few diagnostic spells. As far as they could determine, the eldritch magic fed on the life energy of the operator to tear a portal in space. The actual magic powering the spell was eluding them though.

“What I don’t understand,” Richter said, drawing Hisako’s attention, “is how that little bone can contain transportation magic. If it’s that easy, why are we building portals between our settlements? They’re kinda expensive, you know.”

Hisako thought for a few moments, figuring out how best to respond. “In The Land, nothing is impossible, Lord Richter. It is good to remember that. There is also almost always more than one way to accomplish a goal. Masters of Air magic, for instance, are paid exorbitant sums by kings and the richest of nobles to transport individuals quickly, either by flight or teleportation. The high cost these magi are paid is not only because very few

individuals can manage such magic, but also because such magic consumes rare and expensive spell components that, once used, are gone forever.

“The lich has apparently found a way to use a similar power, but I am sure it also came at a steep cost. Despite what he said about not being concerned about you, he would not have sent his most trusted servant here if that were true. I am willing to bet that the cost of transport in this case was quite high to him personally. Do not forget that travel in this method also takes a serious toll upon the health of whoever uses it. If it is as damaging as I believe, few creatures could even survive using this method of travel. The lich could not even guarantee exactly where he was sending the Death Knight, instead just honing in on a vague location centered around a concentration of Death magic.

“The true power of the portals you have learned to create lies in these three concepts: safe, reliable and self-sustaining. The portals we will build will not only transport individuals, they will transport armies. We will also be able to send one another large amounts of goods instantly, with no ill effects and without requiring any magic or precious resources after the initial cost of construction.

“This bone,” Hisako continued, motioning to the vial she held, “will most likely destroy the gnome’s servant to open a very small rip in space. The cost to keep it open... I believe it will be severe.”

“Define ‘severe’,” Richter requested slowly.

A confusing series of emotions crossed her face. It was too quick for him to read, but her sorrowful tone was clear, “Either myself or Sumiko will have to stay behind when you go to battle the lich. Depending on the specific types of magic that were corrupted by the eldritch to power this spell, we may need magi of other spell types to remain behind as well.” That news was a bit of a hit to Richter, but he didn’t interrupt. “You have seen that one of the capabilities I obtained by becoming a Life master is that I can use the willing life energy of others to power my spells as long as we are in contact.”

Richter nodded. When she had enchanted the Seed Core that later became the Quickening, she had cast a scalable spell. The more mana she had invested in it, the stronger it had grown. To accomplish this, several sprites had placed their hands on her, then several more sprites had placed their hands on each of them. This pattern had repeated again and again until hundreds of sprites had been connected together in a spiral pattern with the Hearth Mother in the center. She had been able to draw upon the mana of her entire settlement to power the spell.

“I do not know exactly how much energy will be necessary to keep the portal open, but I am sure it will be massive. One of us must stay behind to feed energy into the gateway so that whoever goes through the portal can return.”

“Or both of us should stay,” Sumiko spoke up quietly but firmly, looking at the Hearth Mother.

“Sumiko,” Hisako said warningly.

“No,” the meidon Mage replied. Her voice was resolute, and she chopped down and away with her hand. “I will not keep silent about this.” Turning to Richter, she told him, “Life magic may not work on the other side of the portal. Depending on what level the Mausoleum has reached, it might completely inhibit the power of biomancers. It could even inhibit Water and Earth magic.”

“Is this true?” Richter asked his ally.

“Yes,” Hisako finally admitted begrudgingly. “I was, of course, going to tell you, but first I was going to compare what I saw in the memory against what is described in the book I mentioned.” She shot Sumiko a glare, “I merely wanted to gather more information before I brought this matter to you.”

Yoshi spoke up for the first time, “No matter what it shows, Hearth Mother, you cannot risk yourself on this mission if your magic could be hobbled.”

Hisako drew herself up to her full four feet, “May I remind you, *adept* Yoshi, that I am your liege. You also should not need to be reminded that I

am not only a *master* ranked mage, but also the Master of a trinary Place of Power! Life, Light and Earth are all at my command!” She was telling him that not only had she reached skill level one hundred in her magic, granting her *master* rank in that spell type, but that she was the lord of a nexus of ley lines, just like Richter.

The sword *adept* weathered his redheaded mistress’s fury without comment or reaction. It was not the first time he had endured her anger, and it was not the first time he had protected her from herself. Yoshi just stood stoically as she continued to rail against him, until she finally stilled, glaring at him defiantly. His response was quietly stated in spritespeak, a reminder of her duty, “*Foresuto No.*”

Literally it translated into “For the Forest,” but it meant much more. It was the core principle that the wood sprites lived by. It represented their lifelong pursuit of balance in all things, both internally and externally. The forest was their home, but the “Forest” spoke to the world itself, the love every sprite had for their people, and their drive to live in unity with the Universe. For Yoshi to say it to Hisako, it was a charge for her to remember her duty as the leader of their people. The half-sprite Warrior said nothing more, and would now follow his leader wherever she led.

Hisako glared for another moment, before sighing deeply and dropping her gaze. Her response was half-thanks and half-apology, without

giving away what her final decision would be, “*Foresuto No.*”

That little bit of melodrama done, Richter asked a question, “I get why a Core building dedicated to Death magic could inhibit Life magic, but why would it inhibit Earth or Water magic?”

Both Sumiko and Hisako looked at him with identical older-woman expressions of judgement. Richter instinctually froze like a deer in headlights. A moment later, Sumiko sniffed, “You need to study your Lore books more diligently.”

Richter sighed internally. He was lord of his own village in a magical world, and yet, somehow, there was still a mother figure telling him to do better. Instead of rolling his eyes though, he just looked at the two sprites expectantly.

It was Hisako who answered. She spoke a word of Power and a faint white glow surrounded her index finger. Everywhere her finger moved, it left a glowing line hanging in midair. She quickly created what looked like a mandala to Richter, with eight different sections. With a final flick of her finger, she lightly struck the mandala and each section became a different color.

She started at the “northern” section and named each area as she moved her finger counterclockwise. “Life, Earth, Light, Fire, Death, Air,

Dark, and Water. The Basic Elements are not random. They gained their name by being the eight balancing energies of most creatures and plants that live in The Land. Some are in direct opposition,” she pointed to Life and Death, “though by another theory, they complement one another.” Sumiko sniffed loudly at that, clearly not liking the second theory as much as the first.

Hisako ignored the other Life master and continued, “The elements have more interaction than merely being four pairs in opposition. This eight-sided figure is a simple representation of a complex network of how the Basic Elements influence one another. Many Places of Power are comprised of closely connected Powers. The Hearth Tree is built upon Life, Earth and Light,” she pointed to the three side-by-side elements, “while the Mist Village,” she pointed to four more that followed a simple succession, “is built upon ley lines of Air, Dark, Water and Life. Places of Power do not always follow these patterns, however. Law is built upon two opposites for example: Water and Earth, Fire and Air. It has been said that such ‘dissonant’ nexuses of ley lines can lead to strife. The bloody history of the Kingdom of Yves certainly supports this theory, but I cannot say with absolute certainty that this is true.”

Richter nodded in interest. This information answered an earlier question he’d had. The Water spell Randolphus had taught him, *Teatro’s*

Weak Water Casting, let him cast Water, Life and Dark spells while he was underwater. The chaos seed could now see that the three Powers were side by side on the mandala.

He also conceded that the two women might be right. He really did need to make reading and learning Lore a priority. The chaos seed thanked her for the instruction. She nodded in response and waved her hand. The mandala faded from view.

Hisako and Sumiko put their heads back together and started discussing other issues that were essential to the attack. Richter instructed Caulder to stay with them and offer any help needed. With nothing else for the chaos seed to do, he left to prepare for the battle in the method that suited him best.

Richter's first stop was the Forge of Heavens to speak to Krom and enchant more weapons and armor. The dwarf didn't exactly jump for joy at hearing there were two less days to complete Richter's new armor, but he said he could finish the work on time. Krom also muttered something about having just enough time to finish the "special project." Richter didn't get the chance to ask him about it though, seeing as how the Smith immediately began barking orders to the other dwarves. Krom's first pronouncement was that the other smiths should just accept the fact that they wouldn't be sleeping much over the next few days.

The chaos seed spent several hours enchanting. After that, he went to the Dragon's Cauldron and informed Tabia of the shortened timeline as well. She told him that there was just no way to rush the preparation of her potions. She also told him that even with the full seven days she'd been promised there would have been barely been enough time to make enough health, stamina and mana potions to outfit the entire army in that time frame.

Richter told her to forgo the stamina potions in favor of health and mana. Though the battle plan had not been fully drawn up, it was clear the attack was going to be more of a surgical strike than a full-scale military operation. They would have to enter the portal and kill the lich lord as quickly as possible. After that, they would have to hope against hope that the gateway stayed open long enough to return. There were thousands of those green-eyed undead surrounding the Mausoleum. Anyone that got left behind would face almost certain death.

He also asked for two other special potions. Richter had no idea if she had the knowledge required to make them, and, even if she did, if she had the ingredients needed. Tabia wrote down his request, then considered the paper for a minute. After that she began shouting orders to the other village alchemists to prepare various reagents for experimentation. Even with everything going on, it amused Richter to see the similarities between Krom running his forge and Tabia running her lab.

He had complete faith that the beautiful dark-skinned elf would give it her all. He was also hopeful she would succeed. One of the greatest capabilities of the Dragon's Cauldron was that a collection of ingredients could be put in the central glass repository. If they could form a potion, then a Recipe would automatically be generated.

Recipes were as jealously guarded and valuable in The Land as Blueprints were for builders, Schematics were for smiths or Templates were for crafters. He hoped the fact that she immediately had some ideas of potential ingredient combinations boded well for her ability to accomplish what he asked. With nothing more to do, he went on to his next task.

After spending a small amount of time with both the skaths by the lake and the pixies by the Quickening, Richter grabbed a quick lunch and oversaw the evacuation of the few freed prisoners that did not want to join the village. Hisako had allocated ten sprite warriors to escort them to the edge of the forest, at his request. The trip would take weeks, there and back, but the chaos seed wanted them out of his village as soon as possible.

Opening the portal to the lich's home was a potential risk. Doors could swing both ways. Richter didn't plan for anything to go wrong, but he didn't want to chance that those who had chosen to leave might be caught in the crossfire. As each man and woman left, he pressed a gold crown into their hands, wishing them well. Some might have thought it was a waste of

money, but he preferred to think of it as a wise investment in PR. There would now be nearly a hundred people out in the world speaking about him. They could say kind or harsh things. He hoped his generosity would lead them to praise the lord that had not only saved them from slavery but also given them a leg up to start a new life.

Richter was about to go to the Dungeon when Terrod found him. The captain informed him that two different patrol groups had reported in within five minutes of each other, both stating that they had seen strange large creatures within miles of the village. Thirty minutes later, Richter was leading one war party towards one of the monsters and Terrod was leading his own war party towards another. There weren't many with the War Leader skill in the village, but the few who had it could greatly augment the power of their troops.

Richter was gone for hours, but the trip had been more than worth it. He had saved another *sakeru* pixie! The one that Richter found had bonded to a large ant-like creature. The pixie chrysalis had been situated in the middle of its head like a jewel on a crown. The ant was only four feet tall, but it had moved so fast that even Richter had had trouble keeping track of it. Coupled with the fact that one bite of its pincers was enough to chop a small tree in half, it was a dangerous opponent. Still, it had fallen relatively easily to his war party of eleven.

Terrod had a little more trouble. The beast he had found was half-plant and half-undead, and it wasn't alone. It was a bleakwillow. It looked like a six-foot-tall zombie comprised of rotting roots rather than flesh. Bleakwillows could arise from dead trees whose roots had been exposed to Death magic. The nest of pox weasels that had killed the tree and then made a nest within it fit the bill. These vermin were not truly undead but were still instilled with Death magic, allowing their bites to transmit magical infections. The tree might not have mutated for years, but the *sakeru* pixie was drawn to its potential power. Both the bleakwillow and the weasels were abyssal creatures, leading Terrod to believe a *sakeru* pixie was present even though he hadn't seen it. Whether there was a pixie or not, the weasels' abyssal nature had given them increased health and instilled their attacks with an effect called *blackfire*.

Two members of Terrod's war party had been badly burned and afflicted with debuffs like *Despair*. The captain wisely retreated with his wounded back to the village, leaving behind two meidon sprites with their pixies to watch the creatures. With the sprites' Woodcraft ability, they were able to stay hidden while ensuring that their quarry didn't escape. Once back in the village, the captain reported to Richter. Thankfully, there was just enough light for them to move en masse back towards the bleakwillow. Having so many together greatly decreased the experience each could earn

from the fight, but rescuing the pixie was more important. Richter assigned Terrod to his own war party, allowing the captain's men to benefit from all his badges and promotions as well. They also brought another ten meidon sprites just to be safe.

They found the abyssal creatures again with little difficulty. Even if Terrod's sprites had not been left behind, Richter's tracking ability would have made it easy to backtrace the trail. The monsters' foul natures had left clear and obvious signs of corruption on the natural forest, if you had the skill to see them. This time the battle turned in favor of the Mist Village.

The opening strike involved fifteen sprites and two hunters sighting on the seven pox weasels. The village forces couldn't risk imbued strikes, not with the pixie chrysalis somewhere nearby, but their arrows had been coated with Sun Lotus Poison. Two arrows each was enough to do a large amount of damage, and the poison finished off the fast but small creatures before they could reach any of Richter's people. Seven ribbons of rainbow light swirled into the air thanks to the *Soul Trap* arrows that were becoming standard in the village. That left the bleakwillow.

It roared and flowed toward the warband, moving smoothly on countless roots rather than feet. Richter had already prepared for its attack. He had summoned both a saproling and a gold fox. Casting *Akaton Evolution* had evolved them into a hardwood saproling and a shimmer fox.

The shimmer fox gained attack abilities that were Life-based.

The chaos seed set both summoned creatures on the bleakwillow, instructing them to keep it busy without causing large damage. Richter was sure it held a pixie chrysalis somewhere in its body, seeing as how it was an abyssal creature, but he hadn't pinpointed its location yet. He didn't want to risk the small pixie child being hurt by an errant blow. Instead, he and a few other sprites shot carefully aimed arrows at the edges of the bleakwillow, chipping away at its health.

Both the plant-based nature of the undead and the fact that it was now an abyssal creature rather than just a Death monster made the Sun Lotus poison less effective than it would have been otherwise. It still caused damage. The warband retreated before it, letting the poison do its work while the monster roared in impotent rage. A few minutes later, the monster broke apart into nothing more than rotting leaves, roots, and bark. Another ribbon of rainbow light flew into the air before disappearing into Richter's Bag of Holding. In the middle of the heap of decay, Richter found the chrysalis of another pixie.

After that, they rushed home as quickly as possible. Dusk had been coming on when they started and the first stars could be seen in the night sky by the time they made it back to the safety of the village walls. They had needed to kill several low-level monsters on the way. Richter congratulated

everyone and made his way to the Quickening. There, he was met by Elora and her children, who swirled above his head in delight. The pixie queen looked at him hopefully, but he regretfully had to tell her that her fourth child had not been found. All she did in response was kiss the tip of his nose and thank him for what he had already done.

When he'd seen Elora after returning her first *sakeru* child, he had been awarded experience. This time was no different.

Quest Update: **Sakeru I**

You have found and returned three of Elora's four missing children! Only one was required to fulfill the terms of a Quest and so the rewards will be increased for heroically doing more.

Reward for returning her second *sakeru* child: 2,500 (base 2,000 x 1.25) Experience Points. +2,000 Relationship Points with every celestial pixie of the Quickening.

Reward for returning her third *sakeru* child: 5,000 (base 4,000 x 1.25) Experience Points. +3,000 Relationship Points with every celestial pixie of the Quickening.

You have returned the **Life**, **Water** and **Dark *sakeru*** pixies. Find and return the *Air* pixie to completely finish this quest and receive a powerful Bonus Reward!

Richter helped Elora bond the chrysalises with nearby trees. All he had to do was place the sleeping pixie against the trunk while she softly sang. The wood yielded and he was able to press the chrysalis into the bark. Letting go, the tree hardened again, and it was done. Elora told him that it might take a while, but her children would heal and awaken in time.

He said goodbye after that and headed back down to the village. After cleaning up quickly, he joined his people for dinner. Though he was tired, Richter took the time to walk around and speak with as many of his new villagers as possible. He ended up spending most of his time with Heman though.

It bothered Richter that he hadn't been able to spend too much time with the other chaos seed. In the back of his head, he'd always thought that meeting another chaos seed would be momentous. That it would either be cathartic to have someone from "home" around or that he would immediately be plunged into a pitched battle. Heman was just... cool, though. Every time he saw him, he liked the man more, and all the new chaos seed ever wanted to do was thank Richter for his hospitality and ask to maybe see more of the forest.

After more than an hour had passed Richter finally begged off, feeling

sleep starting to pull him down. He made sure to promise the man that he would try to find time to speak about Earth again soon. Heman just laughed and told him not to work so hard, thanking him again for making the village the one safe place in The Land. The stress and concerns that were at the back of Richter's mind almost constantly these days felt a bit less heavy after speaking with the other chaos seed. There was a lightness to his steps as he started walking to his bed.

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Unfortunately, it seemed there was no rest for the wicked and weary. Before he made it to the catacombs, a guard jogged up to tell him that “Dungeon Keeper Roswan” requested his presence in the Dungeon. Sighing, Richter just nodded. He started to walk back towards the gate but then stopped with a faint smile. Instead, he just cast *Dungeon Transport*. Mist rose around him and he focused on the Node next to the Well of Offering. Soon he was standing in the first Room of the Dungeon.

A prompt greeted him.

*Welcome back to the **Barrow of the Chaos Serpent**, Dungeon Master Richter.*

What?

Roswan stood nearby, “Grrrrmmm, good. This way.” The mustached elf started walking towards the portal that led to the Dungeon proper.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Richter called out. “What did you want to see me for, and why is the Dungeon’s name now the ***Barrow of the Chaos Serpent?*** Last I checked, it was the Dungeon of Bloody Chaos.”

“Grrmmm,” Roswan said stopping. “That name was ridiculous. I changed it. What I want to show you is this way.” He started walking again.

“Whoa, man! You can’t just go around changing the name of my Dungeon without talking to me. It’s just not-”

“Does it sound better, son?” Roswan asked, fixing him with a thousand-yard stare.

“Well... yeah, but-”

“Grrmm,” Roswan responded, nodding. Richter was pretty sure this ‘Grrmm’ meant ‘Good. I’m glad that’s settled,’ but he couldn’t be a hundred percent sure. Roswan’s unique language of grunt-groans seemed heavily dependent on how many g’s, r’s, and m’s were used and in what combination. It was clearly a higher language, because even Richter’s Gift of Tongues ability was stumped. Whatever it meant, the elf wasn’t waiting. “Then once again, we should be walking, this way!” the Engineer threw one arm forward with his finger pointing at the portal.

Richter sighed heavily, “Okay, fine, but what about the monsters? You don’t have a weapon and even I am wary of going in there alone.”

“That is not a problem,” the elf replied. “As Dungeon Keeper I can make myself immune to the Dungeon’s monsters and traps.”

“Well, what about me?”

“You?” Roswan asked as if it had never occurred to him. “You should move quickly or quietly. Most likely both, son. There are monsters in there, you know.” Then he stepped through the shimmering portal.

“Shnikinrickinfashinrockn-rick rassardly!” Richter grumbled to himself. He drew his elementum short sword. Checking its charges, he saw they were mostly depleted so he pulled out some low-level soul stones from his bag to juice it back up. Adopting *Stealth*, his visage faded and melded with the shadows in that part of the room, and he stepped through the portal.

Roswan had already walked two dozen yards away along the wall to the left. Richter followed behind as quickly as he could without losing his hidden status. He could see both prowlers and tuskers ambling around between the blood-red columns. Using *Analyze*, he saw that their levels remained in the teens, well below his own level of thirty-eight, but he still didn’t want to attract the attention of dozens of bloodthirsty monsters. Roswan, in contrast, appeared utterly unconcerned, just walking along with the same cocksure gait as always.

They didn’t go far. The elf turned left down a tunnel. A tunnel that

Richter was sure hadn't been there the last time he was here. It led down a short ten-foot slope which ended in an archway. Just like the entrance into the main part of the Dungeon, this doorway had a shimmering energy field in front of it. It was clear but hazy, like shower glass. Beyond it he could see a faint light shining through, but couldn't make out any other details. Roswan was waiting for him in front of it.

As soon as Richter joined him at the door, a prompt appeared.

*Greetings, Dungeon Master. You have found a new Room: **Egg Genesis Chamber***

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," he exclaimed, looking at Roswan with a roll of his eyes.

The only response was another round of creepy and toothy giggling from the man. Sighing, Richter stepped through the portal.

Inside was a short rectangular room. Four rows of shelves were on either side and they were jam-packed with nests of straw. On each nest was a fat chicken. More chickens roamed around the dirt floor pecking at small insects they found. That was all crazy enough, but it had nothing on what was at the back of the room. That area was completely free of bird nests. Instead, it had a cot, a firepit, and a rig to balance a frying pan over the fire. Richter lost it. The mustached bastard, the same mustached bastard he was

trusting with this amazing and powerful resource, had decided to build himself an apartment and a *free-range* kitchen! There was even a toilet and a small spring of water flowing from the wall!

Slapping a hand to his face, Richter tried to figure out where to start. How many Dungeon Points had this cost? Don't you think you should have built a Room that generated treasure or maybe even a spring of healing water? What the hell is wrong with you? Richter ultimately decided on, "Why?" said as slowly as he could manage. As soon as the question left his lips though he changed his mind, his irritation poking through, "No! How? No! You know what? I want an answer to the first question! Why?!"

"I know." Roswan replied with a smile, completely ignoring the vibe in the room. "It is impressive."

Richter looked at him, waiting for more, waiting for anything really, but Roswan was just looking at the chicken coop with pride.

"Dude!" the chaos seed finally snapped. Roswan came out of his reverie and looked at Richter in surprise. The bastard had actually forgotten he was there!

"Grmm, access your Dungeon screen," the elf prompted. "That should answer your questions."

Doing so, some of Richter's irritation faded away, the chaos seed

more than interested in the increased functionality now present. Several new areas were available:

Dungeon Name	Barrow of the Chaos Serpent
Monster Type	Beasts (<i>All</i>) and Animals (<i>All</i>)
Rooms	Entrance Chamber Egg Genesis Chamber
Level	1
Dungeon Points	168/day Current Reserved Total: 31
Point Allocation	Standard
Available Resources	...
Resource Allocation	Standard
Available Loot	...
Loot Allocation	Standard
Motivations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Primary: Connect to Labyrinth 2. Blood Rite 3. Limitless Power
Dungeon External Defenses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consuming Sands 2. Siren Rock 3. Esur Vines 4. Snake's Head (Doubt)

The Dungeon's name had changed and the Rooms now listed the egg chamber as well. It looked like about five hundred Dungeon Points had been

used, presumably to make the new Room. The loot and resources available were already starting to get extensive so he minimized them with a thought. The interface also listed the three discovered Motivations of the Dungeon: to connect to the Labyrinth, to gain new types of rare blood and to embody as many types of magic as possible.

There were completely new tiles on the screen: *Point Allocation*, *Resource Allocation*, *Loot Allocation*, and *Dungeon Defenses*. He didn't really feel like diving too deep into the first three yet, not with the fourth offering answers to questions that had been bugging him for almost a week. When the hill that contained the Dungeon had appeared outside of the village, it had also come with three strange patches of land. The Chaos energy that had created the Dungeon had changed these three swaths from grassland into barriers that blocked any approach to the hill except from the north.

Richter focused on the defenses one at a time. *Consuming Sands* obviously referred to the patch of midnight-blue desert that protected the western approach to the hill. Looking at the words closely, a prompt appeared.

Consuming Sands are indigenous to the moon of Aquiel. They are a living organism that, though not self-aware, is always hungry. The intense pressure exerted by the sands allows for rapid production of gems and

combustible liquids from the remains of organic creatures. These two treasures draw even the knowledgeable into the crushing embrace of the Consuming Sands. Creatures killed by the sands will be made accessible to the Dungeon as respawnable monsters. **+10% to Gem Spawning.**
+10% to Flammable Liquid production.

Richter blinked, reading it twice. Was that blue patch of sand really a rapid way to make oil? And what was that part about making gemstones? The overtone was clear. The sands were predators of some type, but it also appeared they could be a cash cow for the village. If he could figure out how to use them safely.

The next defense was *Siren Rock*. It had to pertain to the mini-mountain range of clear crystal that protected the southern border of the hill. Richter focused on the words and another notification appeared.

Siren Rock is the scourge of seafarers in the northern Raquig Ocean. These floating crystals show only a small part of themselves above the water while hiding massive and sharp protrusions beneath the surface. They can call and mesmerize the unsuspecting to guide their boats onto the hull-staving protrusions. The rocks do not feed in a conventional manner, but instead are strengthened by the escaping life force of dying creatures.

Sea predators often swim around Siren Rocks to feed on the sailors of sinking ships, but the rocks themselves can directly feed on the emotional energy of any creature that touches them. Such beings die as their very will to live is sapped away. Creatures killed by the Siren Rock will be made accessible to the Dungeon as respawnable monsters. **-10%**

Perception of all Adventurers while in the Dungeon.

Well, that was all kinda weird. He had vampire rocks in his backyard. Vampiric *mermaid* rocks, Richter corrected himself. And he definitely didn't like the decreased Perception part. That meant any traps would be that much harder to find. He knew the Dungeon had to be strong to protect itself, but still... this just seemed like a *bad* thing.

Shaking his head, he realized that, bad or not, there was nothing he could do about it. He checked the third entry, *Esur Vines*. The writhing, thorn-covered vines covered the eastern approach to the hill.

Esur Vines are a predatory plant from the Great Equatorial Wilds. They feed on the blood and carcasses of animals foolish enough to get within reach of their brutal tendrils. Known as "The Savage Grace," the only blessing its victims are granted is a swift death. Creatures killed by the Esur Vines will be made accessible to the Dungeon as respawnable

monsters. **+10% Plant Growth and Plant Potency in the Dungeon.**

The vines sounded like a bad way to go. Their trait finally seemed like a boon, however. Perhaps the Dungeon could be an herb factory for the village. Even with Isabella's garden and the greenhouse attached to the Dragon's Cauldron, Tabia always needed more raw materials. Richter would just have to wait and see how it worked out.

What was clear, however, was that three sides of the Dungeon were bordered with deadly creatures that could not be resisted or bargained with. Yeah, his decision to not let the kids play outside the walls had definitely been a good one. The last defense, the snake's head cave mouth, just showed the *Doubt* debuff that Richter already knew about. It also had the word "Current" next to it. That made him wonder if there were other enchantments it could cast instead. For the moment though, he had a more important question on his mind.

"Can you make it so that the Dungeon defenses don't hurt any of the villagers?"

"You have the same capabilities that I do," Roswan replied. "You are the Dungeon Master, correct?" he asked, like the answer was obvious. Which, of course, it was.

The fact that Roswan was right irritated Richter to no end. Huffing slightly in annoyance, he accessed each defense one at a time, this time with the intention in mind of making the defenses' targets selective. There was actually an amazing amount of functionality. He could make the defenses ignore individual people or whole races. Richter stopped and thought about it, realizing that the defenses might be a good for the village in general. He gave immunity to all of his villagers, the kindir that belonged to Verget Kunig and the sprites loyal to him and Hisako. Anyone else would have to take their chances.

While all of that had been interesting, it still didn't answer the question of why Roswan had made a damned chicken coop! "So, I don't get it, man. Are these chickens deadly somehow? Do they spit fire? Have poisonous claws? What?"

Roswan pinned him with a glare that was half-confused and half-offended, "These are chickens, son. They are the blessed vehicle that the banished gods gave us to create one of the two greatest substances known to elf or beast!" He didn't say anything else, just letting his stare do the talking.

"You mean eggs, don't you?"

"Eggs!" Roswan interjected before Richter had even finished talking.

Richter wanted to rip that mustache off! Instead, he tried logic, "But

this is a Dungeon, man. Don't think I didn't notice that those Dungeon Points were missing. You used them to make this Room! If you're going to use Dungeon Points, shouldn't they be used to make things like scary monsters? Or better yet, treasure? Randy and Hisako are up my ass telling me that I need to make the Dungeon strong ASAP! And you give me a Room that only makes... breakfast. I hope you can turn these chickens into magical attack chickens or something!"

The caterpillar sitting on top of the elf's lips began to vibrate in a way that meant Roswan was extremely irritated. Not just his normal, pathologically ever-present level of irritated either. "What is wrong with you, son? Who in the hell would take something innocent and delicious like a chicken or an egg, or a..." the Engineer stopped, at a loss for words.

"Bunny?" Richter supplied.

"Or a bunny," Roswan said, nodding and gesturing with his hands like it was the perfect example. "And make it dangerous? I do not plan to fear my food, *Lord* Richter. When I eat, it is the food that fears me!" The elf's eyes were spitting fire and his normally taciturn face was so severe Richter wondered if the Mist Village was about to have its first Dungeon Keeper-Dungeon Master battle royale!

Thinking about it for a bit, Richter finally decided to chalk the Room

up as a business expense. If it kept Roswan happy and got him to work hard, it was probably worth the points that had been spent. At the very least, it would mean more eggs for everyone else at breakfast. He decided to simply say, “Nice Room.”

“Grrmmm,” the elf replied after a few moments. Then, looking around at his pride-and-joy again, he added in a mollified tone, “It does some other things too. You should be able to see it on the Dungeon screen.” The elf was clearly in love with his creation, because soon he was smiling his mustached smile again as he looked at the nests.

Richter started to access the information window again, but then sighed heavily as Roswan stepped through the room, grabbing eggs here and there. It wouldn’t have been that bad, but the song the Engineer was singing to himself was just weird. “First you take the chicken to the killing stump...”

Willing his mind to fight off the creep attack he’d just suffered, the chaos seed accessed the window for the Egg Genesis Chamber, an absolutely insane name for a chicken coop in his opinion.

Egg Genesis Chamber (Level 1)

Provides a safe place for a specific Dungeon Creature: **Chickens**, to roost and lay eggs. Provides easy egress for chickens to enter other parts of the Dungeon.

<i>Chicken Capacity: 50</i>	<i>Chicken Respawn Rate: 5/day</i>	<i>Egg Production: 3/chicken/day</i>
This Room will provide an easy source of food for Dungeon monsters. +10% speed to monster generation in the Dungeon.		
This is a SAFE zone. Aggressive monsters and Dungeon debuffs cannot affect anyone inside of this Room. Traps cannot be placed in this Room. Current Access: Unrestricted.		

Richter paid special attention to the last line in the prompt, “Current Access: Unrestricted.” Focusing, he found he could make it so that only he and Roswan could enter through the energy field at the front of the room. He actually tried to make it so that access was restricted to him alone, but apparently, as Dungeon Keeper, the elf had the run of the place. That gave him a moment’s pause, not quite comfortable about not having complete control over something as powerful as the Dungeon, but he let it go a moment later. Relying on others had never been easy for him, but he was also smart enough to understand that it was necessary.

He decided to change the access to “Restricted,” and made sure that everyone he gave Dungeon access to would also be able to enter the Room. As stupid as the name was, it was a *safe* zone. If his people were hard-

pressed fighting the Dungeon's monsters and couldn't make it to the exit, being able to enter this Room might just save their lives. He didn't plan on letting just anyone access it though. If someone made their way into the Dungeon by some other means, say Adventurers from the Labyrinth, they were on their own.

"I see now that there are real benefits to this Room," Richter admitted begrudgingly. "And it's actually a great idea to have a Safe point off the main chamber so our people can hide if they get overwhelmed." He was starting to understand how much power his title of Dungeon Master entailed. Effectively, he'd just made a battleground where his people could be safe, but enemies couldn't.

Roswan responded with a self-satisfied, "Grrmmm," at seeing Richter's grudging admiration. There was a 'no shit, Sherlock' component of that 'grmm' as well, in the chaos seed's opinion, but Richter figured maybe he deserved it for judging without knowing all the facts.

"This could also be very helpful in ensuring the village has enough to eat," the chaos seed said, thinking about it. "Could we take these chickens out of the Dungeon and breed them with those in the village?"

Roswan rubbed his neck as he thought about it, "Grmm. I am no expert yet, but I am already getting feelings about what will and will not

work. It is almost as though I am learning the Dungeon like it is a part of me. I know, for instance, that the creatures created by the Dungeon are sustained by its magic. If you take them out of here, they will die. The carcasses are just meat though, so animals killed here should be able to be eaten without any issue.”

Richter nodded. He already knew that. Except for a bad case of gas, eating all those koran tuskers had gone off without a hitch. He did have a thought though, “What about creatures that are born in the Dungeon? Like baby monsters born in a Lair?”

The elf’s mustached danced back and forth as he chewed on the idea, “If you catch them young enough it might work. If they stay in the Dungeon for several days, however, they will magically grow and mature. Then, there will be no difference between them and Dungeon-spawned monsters.”

Even with that caveat, this was good news. It could really help the village’s tight food situation. Adding five chickens a day to the larder, not to mention a hundred and fifty eggs, would go far. He’d have to assign someone the task of grabbing the five chickens every day, but he had already noted a transport Node in the Room when he came in, so whoever he sent wouldn’t even have to go through the main chamber and risk attacks. Richter also decided he would give the order to collect any newborn chicks that were seen. If they could grow normally along with the chickens out in the village,

poultry population growth could be exponential! He stopped a moment, thinking that he would never in his life have predicted he'd be getting excited about chickens getting it on... but he was!

“Alright, man,” Richter said with a smile. “You did good.”

Roswan response was just to look back with his normally stoic expression, but Richter was pretty sure he saw a happy twinkle in the mustached elf's eye.

“Now,” Richter continued, clapping his hands and rubbing them together, “what else can you do for me?”

CHAPTER 84 – Day 145 – Kuborn 35, 0 AoC



The two men talked for another half an hour. Roswan described what else he had discovered about the Dungeon since being its Keeper. First, they talked about the tiles that had been added to the interface. That had occurred automatically, the Dungeon's response to Roswan's Specialty. More functionality might be possible in the future, but the options already added gave a great deal more control over the barrow's growth.

The *Point Allocation* tile dealt with what areas the Dungeon was growing in each day. It described where the one hundred and sixty-eight Dungeon Points that were generated each day would be invested. Those points could be funneled into any number of endeavors like *Monster Creation*, *Lair Formation*, *Loot Generation*, *Resource Generation*, *Leveling*, *Dungeon Growth*, *Dungeon Point Reserve* and more. *Dungeon Point Reserve* was apparently like a piggy bank of points that Roswan could use at his discretion. That was how he had been able to make his new Room.

Apparently, creating the Egg Genesis Chamber hadn't taken nearly as many DPs as Richter had thought. As soon as he had assigned Roswan as Dungeon Keeper, the Engineer had immediately gone to the Forge and requisitioned pickaxes. The elf had then used his new ability to summon mist workers and had put them to work digging into the wall of the central chamber. He had tried to use other mist workers from the village, but the Dungeon monsters had immediately torn them apart. Only Roswan's own summoned creatures shared his immunity to attack.

Though the elf's small mana pool and low Wisdom had severely limited how quickly he could summon mist workers, over time he had been able to conjure more than a dozen. The tireless creatures had been able to hack through a large amount of rock in a relatively short amount of time. The 70% boost to the village's Productivity hadn't hurt either.

The constructs had worked all night. Once they had excavated enough rock to form the room, the Dungeon Keeper had only needed to use two DPs to smooth it out. He'd already "appropriated" a chicken from the village's livestock and thrown it down the Well of Offering. Richter had to stifle a sudden chortle at the mental image of a living chicken falling down that interdimensional abyss. BaGAWK! He shook his head, reflecting that there might actually be something wrong with him, and turned his attention back to Roswan.

After the room had been sanded out, Roswan used about a fifty DPs to turn it into an actual Room. Because the excavation had already been done, and because the chickens were simple, noncombat creatures, it hadn't cost very much. Roswan told him that the largest expenditure had actually been to make it a *safe* zone. Again, that cost could have been much higher, but since the Room didn't have much square footage, it didn't break the bank.

After Roswan had explained how the Room had been created, he explained the other facets of the *Point Allocation* tile. Each day, the Dungeon would decide what portion of its available points would go into each category. Roswan apparently had some minor influence over this but could only affect the Dungeon's will in small ways. To Richter, it sounded almost like the elf was pruning a Bonsai tree. He couldn't dictate how the Dungeon would grow, but with care and through small changes, he could *shape* it so that it became a reflection of both his will and its own nature.

Roswan said that he had the ability to reallocate up to 10% of the total DPs from other areas without penalty. He could do more than that, but there would be a net loss. Specifically, it would cost five DPs to allocate one to another area. The Dungeon Keeper also revealed that he had Talents that could either increase his reallocation allowance or decrease the penalty, but he hadn't decided what to spend his Talent Points on yet.

Apparently, most of the DPs so far had gone to leveling. Roswan told

him there appeared to be a cap of 50% limiting how many Dungeon Points could go into any one area of investment. Again, he was fairly sure this could be increased through his Profession. Right now, half of the Dungeon's DPs were invested in increasing its level. That mean the resources it generated and the loot it produced were less than they could have been if more points were allocated to those areas.

Richter realized that this wasn't overly surprising though, seeing as how the Dungeon's Primary Motivation was to connect with the Labyrinth. That could only occur once it reached level ten. Checking, he saw that the experience required to reach level two was ten thousand points. It immediately occurred to him that there might be a correlation between the leveling system the Dungeon adhered to and his own. It had cost him a thousand XP to move from level one to level two. Perhaps the Dungeon just needed ten times as much.

Richter couldn't be sure because he could only see what was required to get to the next level.

Dungeon Experience: 3,281/10,000

One thing that Roswan was sure about was that each Dungeon Point could be traded for ten Experience Points. If Richter was right about the ratio

though, even if the Dungeon could somehow allocate 100% of its DPs to leveling, it would still take more than two hundred and sixty days to connect to the Labyrinth. The Dungeon Keeper told him that was another reason why Dungeons needed to feed. They could channel 100% of the energy they gained from kills to any area they wished. That was when Roswan pointed out that if Richter unlocked another of the village's Powers, then the Dungeon Points generated each day would gain another 100% boost.

Richter shook his head. He just wasn't willing to do that yet. There would be many benefits to unlocking another Power, but it would also make the lands around his village more dangerous. Each Power awakened was like a beacon, attracting more and stronger monsters. So far, his people had been able to keep up with the dangers of the forest, but activating another ley line didn't just step up the danger, it leapfrogged it.

Before he had claimed his Place of Power, it had been wolves and foxes that he'd had to deal with. After claiming Mastery over Air magic, those had become timber wargs and giant scorpions. After gaining his second Mastery in Life magic, he'd had the distinct pleasure of being chased by a twenty-foot-tall rock giant. He just didn't know what the third level of Mastery would bring, and he wasn't willing to risk the lives of his people to find out. Not until they were stronger.

Both men knew that another way to easily grow the Dungeon was

through its consuming Adventurers, but neither proposed feeding villagers to it. However, as Richter discarded the idea another occurred to him; he wouldn't feed his people to the Dungeon, but other creatures...now that was an interesting idea.

“Can you channel more Dungeon Points into the defenses?” Richter asked. “Specifically, the Siren Rock?”

Roswan responded that he couldn't funnel many of the DPs, but he could redirect some of them. Richter smiled. Maybe there was a way to unlock his third Power, get the Dungeon more points *and* keep his people safe! It definitely merited more thought.

The Dungeon Keeper kept explaining. He admitted that at first he hadn't known the difference between *Dungeon Growth* and *Leveling* either. He'd discovered that the former referred to physical growth. Each Dungeon had a tendency to dig deeper and wider. Roswan had found he could influence whether that expansion was generally to the north, south, east or west, and even if the Dungeon grew a second floor. The last option required a massive amount of Dungeon Points, but would also open up a good deal more opportunities. Even better, Roswan could use his mist workers to directly influence the Dungeon's expansion.

Normally, excavated rock would regenerate inside the Dungeon,

literally allowing endless opportunities for mining. Roswan could keep that regrowth from happening. On consideration though, it presented some amazing possibilities. Richter immediately gave the elf an order. The Dungeon Keeper said he would get his mist workers started on it right away.

The next tabs Roswan explained were *Loot Allocation* and *Resource Allocation*. The Dungeon made both periodically. The frequency with which items and resources appeared depended on how many Dungeon Points were allocated to the task. Right now, *Loot Allocation* and *Resource Allocation* were receiving 5% each. The type of loot and resources provided were randomly produced in various distributions. Roswan had the capability to affect this as well to an extent, but it depended on several factors: for example, the rarity of loot or resources and their inherent magic concentration.

In regard to items, Roswan could spend DPs and make it more likely for specific loot to drop. Even then, a drop was not guaranteed. While it might only require one DP to make it 10% more likely for a *common* item, such as a copper coin, to appear, it might take one hundred DPs to increase the chance of a *scarce* item dropping by a mere 1%. Each boost only lasted one day, though again, the Engineer said there were Talents that could extend this timeframe or decrease the initial cost of certain drops appearing.

Resources were a bit harder to nail down. Just as with loot, the rarity

of a resource came into play; however, the odds of it appearing were further complicated by the relative abundance of the material in the lands surrounding the Dungeon. While both copper and iron ore were *common*, for example, it was far more likely for iron veins to appear in the Dungeon, as there was an iron mine nearby.

It cost more to affect resources than loot, but the tradeoff was that the increase was permanent until that resource actually appeared. If Richter ever got his hands on some elementum ore and dropped it down the Well of Offering, he could use DPs to increase the incidence of a vein appearing all the way up to 100%. It would probably cost something like a million points though, seeing as elementum wasn't even native to Richter's plane of existence. Also, each time you increased the likelihood of a resource appearing it cost more, so increasing the incidence from 2% to 3% was more expensive than going from 1% to 2%. The cost of this could also be improved through Roswan's Dungeon Keeper Specialty.

A third factor that came into play were any requirements for certain resources to even exist. Plants like shiverleaf fronds, for instance, required deep water and darkness to grow. As the Dungeon lacked an area like that currently, it had zero chance of providing that herb. Thankfully, it had already been established that Roswan could make new Rooms and terrains inside of the Dungeon, so the possibilities were endless.

Richter could see a list of the currently available loot and resources, just like before he had made Roswan Dungeon Keeper. Now though, he could see exactly what the chance was for each to appear. There was also a modifier at the top of the chart showing that the incidence of resources being generated was increased by 30% thanks to Richter's Life Mastery ability, *Bounty of Life*. In addition, the yield of resources would also be increased by 25% and rare resources were 25% more likely to appear thanks to the Quickening being level two. In a short while, the Dungeon might fix the village's money issues!

Richter was both amazed and happy that the Dungeon had so much new functionality, but he was concerned about how Talent Point-intensive the elf's Specialty seemed to be. The main way Talent Points were obtained was by leveling. The main way to level was through quests and combat. If Roswan was always stuck constructing buildings or tinkering in the Dungeon, Richter didn't know how he'd be able to get the requisite XP needed to rank up his Talents.

That was when Roswan dropped the bombshell. His Specialty came with a unique quirk, just as Richter's did. Though the chaos seed didn't know it, both Essence Enchanting and Dungeon Keeping were *epic* ranked Specialties. Neither was quite mythic, but they were only one level shy. The nearly-unique Talents offered by such high-level Specialties were only one

reason that highly ranked Specialties were so coveted. The other was that they normally had built-in mechanisms that encouraged their own growth.

Essence Enchanting allowed Richter to trade his Experience Points for Talent Points. Initially there had been a serious penalty to any XP he earned after buying TPs, but he'd been able to advance his Specialty to reduce that cost. As Dungeon Keeper, Roswan was awarded 1% of all of the experience gained by the Dungeon. The elf revealed that this was one area into which he'd already invested his Talent Points. It had cost one hundred and fifty TPs, but he'd been able to increase that to 3%. Roswan also told him that on his Dungeon interface there seemed to be an option to use Dungeon Points to purchase Talent Points, but it was currently greyed out. The elf hoped that he would unlock the option soon, but as of right now he had no idea how.

Richter made sure to stress that Roswan needed to remember his obligations to building up the village as well. If this new gnome builder worked out, then the portal was the next project he wanted started. The chaos seed would feel a lot better if his closest ally, the Hearth Tree, was only a step away rather than a three-day hike. He also charged the elf with finding a good location to build the portal, somewhere that balanced accessibility with defense. The portal itself needed to be protected, but Richter was wary of placing the gateway inside of the village walls in case the other end was ever

compromised. It would be the same as rolling out a welcome mat to hostiles.

The elf's mustache started doing a "thinking" quiver as he mused over the problem. He promised Richter that the Townhall would be completed within the next three days, two if they got lucky. The chaos seed smiled at that, seeing as how currently the village was flush with Luck. More than ready for sleep, he placed his hand on the transport sphere and focused. An instant later, he was standing in front of the snake's head entrance. Jogging back to the village, he kept an eye out. Night had fallen, but the many mist lights hanging outside of the walls made a sneak attack extremely unlikely. Richter made it into the village and then into his bed without any further issue. His dreams were restless and filled with battle.

CHAPTER 85 – Day 148 – Kuborn 38, 0 AoC



The next three days passed without major incident, though everyone in the village started to react subconsciously to the looming conflict. People still laughed, but it stopped a second faster than it would have before. Children still played, but a bit more quietly. The village was preparing for war.

The good news was Hisako's army kept the village safe from monster attacks. They were more than worth whatever food they ate. They even helped with the village larders by bringing back dead creatures and monsters every day.

They didn't just find roving monsters. In three days they had also found a den and two larger nests. Both could have grown into lairs, and possibly even swarms of monsters, if they hadn't been dealt with. Once again, the sprites had helped deal with a serious threat to the village. Richter had personally only found one nest before, the assengai spiders. They had

caught the assengai infestation early, but there had been thousands of eggs just waiting to hatch. Richter told Terrod about the upsurge in nests and the captain promised to increase the number of patrols in response.

There was good news on that front. One hundred and forty-eight of the new villagers had agreed to join the village guard. Another twenty-two had experience as hunters and so added to the village in that capacity. Not only did it help the food situation, but they also doubled as scouts to look for nests and other enemies. Even the pixie children were pitching in. Just as Elora had told him she would, she now allowed her children to range into the surrounding forest. If they left the village, they mostly did so in the company of their meitu'sprites, but she also allowed them to fly around the village unescorted in small groups. Their small size worked in their favor as potential predators rarely saw them and even when they did, their racially augmented speed let them avoid danger.

In fact, it was the pixies that found a fourth nest, filled with diminutive rat-like creatures that could walk on their hind legs. Though the rats were small in stature, they were almost as wrathful as a dragon. The two-foot chittering monsters could use ice magic, and although the bolts they fired were only the equivalent of *weak* rank one spells, they still caused damage. Even *weak* magic could kill when it was fired from hundreds of little hands. Richter took his full warband of Professional Warriors, Mages

and Rogues to deal with it, and they destroyed it without too much difficulty. He felt a bit of déjà vu clearing the nest. It reminded him of a great story he'd read once. The only bad news was that there was no sign of the last *sakeru* pixie. Knowing how powerful monsters could become after they underwent *sakeru* bonding, Richter was not looking forward to the battle that might be looming on the horizon.

Richter's knowledge of enchantments also grew by leaps and bounds. As always, he spent a good deal of each day enchanting in the Forge. Not only did it help him train his primary skill and Profession, but it also helped to outfit his fighters with deadlier arms and more resilient armor. The increased Luck of the village proved to be exactly what he needed to learn the last Forge enchantments that had been eluding him. Gloran, Krom and several other smiths learned new enchantments as well, something that excited them to no end and increased their regard for him. Even knowing one or two enchantments made a smith valuable. If they ever had to leave the village, they would be employed in a heartbeat. That, of course, was not what Richter wanted and something he planned to avoid at all costs. It was a worry for the future though. The celebration of the now was that he had gained complete access to the Forge's enchantments. Now every single colored light that danced inside of the central anvil was his to command!

He was even able to learn most of the enchantments from Nien's

armor. The exceptions were the Greaves of Shadow Pull and the Dirk of Piercing. Those merely crumpled to dust, unfortunately. Even with greatly increased Luck, there was always a chance of failure. He didn't risk seeking the enchantment from the runed gauntlets. Those went to Bartle and Bea to aid in their rune research. He made sure to warn them not to touch the necromium without heavy gauntlets.

In the first two days, he gained all of the enchantments that had been learned by the Forge. He also spent Talent Points to unlock the spell schools of Fire and Air.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Unlock Spell School: Fire Magic** for 10 Talent Points. You may now convert your known Fire Magic spells into Enchantments.*

*You have purchased the Talent: **Unlock Spell School: Air Magic** for 10 Talent Points. You may now convert your known Air Magic spells into Enchantments.*

*You have: **106 Talent Points** remaining.*

You have now purchased the (Weapons) enchantment: **Weak Flame**

Enchantment Size: Unknown

Enchantment School: Fire

You are currently at 0/2,400 of the mana cost to unlock this enchantment.

Effects: Unknown

You have: 105 Talent Points remaining

Learning the enchantment didn't take more than a few hours.

Congratulations! You have learned the enchantment **Fire Damage, Level I**

Enchantment Type: Weapons

Enchantment Size: 3

Enchantment School: Fire

Effect 1: +1 Fire Damage

Richter began practicing with it immediately in the forge and quickly gained a few ranks. The true coup though was advancing his level two sonic enchantment to the fourth rank. That, in turn, increased the rank of his level one sonic enchantment as well. A thought was all that was required to add another column to his enchantment screen showing if they had been learned from the Forge or from his Essence Specialty.

Name (cost)	Level/ Rank	Base Effect per Rank	Source

WEAPONS

Attack +1 (5)	STATIC	Increases attack by +1	Forge
Attack +2 (10)	STATIC	Increases attack by +2	Forge
Freeze (3)	I/V	+1 Cold Damage* +1% chance to <i>Freeze</i> *+100% vs Fire creatures	Forge
Life Attack (2)	I/V	+1 Life Damage* *+100% vs Death creatures	Essence
Death Attack (2)	I/I	+1 Death Damage* *+100% vs Life creatures	Essence
Ignore Defense (3)	I/IV	Ignores +2% of Target's Defense	Forge
Goblin Slaying (3)	I/IV	+6% Damage vs Goblins	Forge
Dark Attack (2)	I/IV	+1 Dark Damage* *+100% vs Light creatures	Forge
Tracking (2)	I/II	Struck creatures leave an obvious trail for 250 yards	Forge
Analysis (4)	I/II	Know information about the struck creature. Depth of knowledge dependent upon multiple factors including, but not limited to, rank of enchantment, level of creature, etc. Each enchantment rank can Analyze up to 5 levels.	Forge
Mana Stealing (3)	I/II	2 mana stolen per hit	Forge

Beast Slaying (3)	I/III	+6% Damage vs Beasts	Forge
Sonic Damage (Level I: 3) (Level II: 4)	I/IV	+1 Earth Damage +1% chance to <i>Disarm</i> *+100% vs Air creatures	Essence
	II/IV	+2 Earth Damage +2% chance to <i>Disarm</i> +1% chance to <i>Shatter</i> *+200% vs Air creatures, +300% vs Crystalline creatures	Essence
Soul Trap (2)	I/III	Traps the soul of the struck creature for five minutes. Can capture up to <i>Special</i> level souls	Essence
Charm Humanoid	I/II	Increases the chance to charm a humanoid Allows you to <i>Charm</i> a humanoid up to level (rank*5) Increases length of maximum <i>Charm</i> effect by 5 minutes (baseline 5 minutes)	Essence
Multishot (5)	I/V	Creates 1 extra projectile upon being shot	Forge
Confusion (2)	I/II	+1% chance to cause <i>Confusion</i>	Forge
Savage (3)	I/I	+1% Critical Hit Chance +25% Critical Hit Damage	Forge
Fire Attack (2)	I/III	+1 Fire Damage (+3 vs Water Creatures)	Essence
ARMOR			

Life Defense (3)	I/III	+1 Defense* *+100% vs Death	Essence
Life Aura (4)	I/III	+1 Damage/5 seconds against Death creatures that come into contact with the enchanted armor Weaker Death creatures will also be discomfited or turned away by even being near items enchanted with <i>Life Aura</i> Range: 5 feet	Essence
Earth Resistance (2)	I/II	Increases Earth Resistance by +1%	Forge
Fire Resistance (2)	I/II	Increases Fire Resistance by +1%	Forge
Death Skill (4)	I/I	Increases Death Magic skill by +1	Forge
Defense +2 (10)	STATIC	Increases Defense by +2	Forge
Shockwave (10)	I/I	Increases Spell Strength of <i>Shockwave</i> by +5 (base 5)	Forge
Darkvision (2)	I/I	Provide 10 yards of Darkvision	Forge
Increase Attack Speed (4)	I/II	Increases Attack Speed by 1%	Forge
Increase Movement Speed (4)	I/III	Increases Movement Speed by 1%	Forge
Increase	I/I	Increases Unarmed Attack Damage by	Forge

Unarmed Attack Damage (3)		5%	
Decay Metal (3)	I/II	+0.1 points of Durability damage to the weapon that strikes this armor per charge expended Works only against metal weapons	Forge
Slick (2)	I/II	+1% Difficulty holding onto this armor	Essence
Heal (4)	I/I	Restores +1 Health	Essence
Distract (4)	I/II	Looking at this item decreases Concentration by 1%	Forge
Balance (5)	I/I	Increases balance by +1	Forge
GENERAL			
Durability (2)	I/III	Increases Durability by +10	Forge
ITEMS			
Summon Insects	I/I	Summons 100 stinging insects for one minute	Essence
Briar (4*)	I/I	Allows you to cover the surrounding area in thorns Increases the density and number of thorns Increases the duration of enchantment Increases range and size of enchantment; variable due to item being enchanted <i>*Macroenchantment Only</i>	Essence
Life's Radiance	I/I	Makes Life magic and creatures 1% more powerful	Essence

(4*)		Makes Death magic and creatures 1% less powerful Increases range and size of enchantment; variable due to item being enchanted <i>*Macroenchantment Only</i>	
Call for Aid (2*)	I/I	Triggers a signal flare notifying any allies within 100 yards of danger <i>*Macroenchantment Only</i>	Essence
Heal (3)	I/I	Restore +1 Health	Essence
Plant Growth (3*)	I/I	Increase speed of plant growth by +1% Increase yield of growing plants by +1% <i>*Macroenchantment Only</i>	Essence

Whereas once he hadn't had enough enchantments, now he was swimming in them! He also learned more about his Enchanting Profession. *Heal*, for instance, had the same effect for armor and items, but the enchantment cost was higher for armor. Some enchantments were better suited to certain mediums. He also learned that macroenchanting was more complicated than he had thought.

Such enchantments were normally done in sections. To enchant the village wall for instance, a functional unit was one hundred cubic feet. Seeing as how the wall was several miles long, the cost in souls would be astronomical. To make it even worse, the asterisks next to the cost meant *ten times* as many soul points would be required to enchant even that one

functional unit. Gloran told him that when Richter delved more into the macroenchanting branch of his Talent tree, he could increase the size of the functional unit and decrease the asterisked costs. The one thing that was clear about macroenchantments was that they, while powerful, were also ungodly expensive.

One unexpected surprise was that his Crafting skill was synergistic with his efforts in the Forge of Heavens. Every skill level he had in Crafting increased the enchantment potential of weapons and armor he worked on by 1%. That meant every forged item could now potentially absorb 25% more soul stuff. It didn't make the material more resilient, however; iron daggers would still explode if he pushed too much energy into them. But it did mean that high quality weapons made of metals with a high enchanting coefficient could now have 25% stronger enchantments.

While he made major strides in Enchanting, Richter barely progressed in his Crafting skill. Enalise, the dual Professional in Mining and Crafting that he'd freed from the goblins, knew how to make some low-level health rings, which was definitely helpful. The problem was that, unlike enchanting weapons or armor, creating enchanted items required very specific materials. It was more akin to alchemy, where components needed to be put together in a specific order.

There was also a slight holdup when he asked Enalise for the

Template to make the health rings. He tried to convince her to share it with him for free but, after she laughed quite loudly in his face, he ended up forking over two gold and three silvers. She assured him that he'd gotten a great price. After he had her sit with Bartle for an hour, the Scholar handed Richter the newly-created magical document. Richter had his very own Template.

You have found: Template: Ring of Health	Durability: 7/7 Template Class: Common Template Level: Simple Weight: 0.3 kg Traits: This Template allows you to create a Ring of Health This ring will increase your maximum HP Max Enchantment Rank/Level: 1/1 Requires: A copper ring (Item Quality: Above Average or better) A <i>common</i> gem (Jewel Clarity: <i>Eye Catching</i> or better) <i>Fortify Health</i> enchantment Base Crafting Time: 1 hour Process: ...
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Enalise told him that the levels of a crafter's Template were the same as that of a smith's weapon Schematic. The lowest level was *simple*. Then came *advanced*, *superior*, *innovative*, *groundbreaking*, *ingenious*, *cutting edge*, *state-of-the-art*, *revolutionary*, *masterwork* and *savant*. This template

was only *simple*.

She went on to explain the importance of a jewel's clarity and its rarity. Gems apparently had the same rarity scale as items: *common*, *uncommon*, *unusual*, etc. The clarity was more exacting though and directly impacted a gem's price. For simplicity, she jotted down what she knew about it on a piece of parchment that he provided.

CLARITY	COST CHANGE
Trash	-80%
Poor	-50%
Occluded	-30%
Flawed	-20%
Cheap	-10% cost
Average	No Change
Eye Catching	+10%
Sparkling	+25%
Vibrant	+50%
Glowing	+75%
Brilliant	+100%
Exquisite	+250%
Prismatic	+500%
Radiant	+750%
Heavenly	+1000-10,000%
Flawless/True	+10,000 – 1,000,000%

The list was helpful, but before he even really paid too much attention, his gaze was drawn to the last line. A *flawless* gem had a ten thousand to a *million* percent markup? Who would ever pay that much for a pretty rock? Of course, it hadn't made sense to him why people would spend two month's pay for a ring back on Earth either. When faced with the decision to buy a badass '69 Chevy Camaro or a teeny, tiny rock that didn't even have any color, it was insane to choose the rock, right? For some reason, that entirely rational and well-considered argument had just never seemed to land when he shared it with the women he'd dated.

Shaking his head at how no one understood his brilliance, Richter looked at the piece of paper again. He was actually taken aback by the sheer number of ranks a jewel's clarity could fall into. It was a more extensive rank system than any other he had learned, including Forging or Alchemy. To his surprise, Enalise told him what she'd written wasn't even scratching the surface. The color of the gem as well as how it was cut could also be very important for higher level Crafting, or so she had heard. For the *simple* Template she had sold him, it shouldn't really matter. To make the low-level ring of health, he could use a jewel cut in any number of ways, but raw gems still wouldn't work. She told him she could show him how to do a simple

square cut provided he could get her some jeweler's tools.

To his happy surprise, her request generated a prompt. Randolphus had told him that having a large group of Professionals around would generate a great deal more quests and it was great to see the truth of that play out. Richter readily accepted the quest in light of the fact that one of his villagers was now a Professed Jeweler.

The Jeweler was a blue-eyed human named Daven with a spiky mop of brown hair atop his head. His gaze was actually a little intense, like a deer caught in headlights, but Richter plowed on with the request. It turned out that the man had actually been planning to ask the chaos seed for help but hadn't yet worked up the nerve. He didn't have a good set of jeweler's tools either. He told Richter that there was a Talent that would let Daven conjure his own tools, but it cost precious Talent Points that he didn't want to waste. Instead, after hearing Richter's request, the Jeweler had generated a quest of his own. That was how Richter had found himself in the smithy discussing the project with Krom.

Richter ended up making three sets of high steel jeweler's tools, though he messed up several times before he was done. When he was finished he handed over a set, fulfilling the terms of Daven's quest. It netted him a cool hundred and twenty-five XP, after his bonus from drinking a Potion of Clarity every day kicked in. Basically, it did jack squat to get him

to his next level, but it earned him two hundred Relationship Points with Daven. The Jeweler said he would come to Richter in the future with any further needs. It was a not so subtle hint that there would be more quests coming. While the experience the quest had generated meant almost nothing to him, Richter could easily see how his low-level villagers would be grateful. Having these... *microquests* pop up regularly would be great for his settlement as a whole.

Richter told Daven to start making copper rings and cutting *common* stones so he could practice his new Template. He was going to say his farewells, but Daven expressed an interest in meeting whomever Richter's second set of jeweler's tools were for. The two men walked back over to where Enalise was waiting, and Richter handed over the jeweler's tools while Daven introduced himself. Finishing the Miner's quest earned him another one hundred and fifty-six experience and twenty Relationship Points with the female Crafter. A bit more XP, but definitely less Relationship Points. Not surprising, as Enalise had been a bit of a hardass from the very beginning.

The chaos seed handed her a *common* gem, a pink agate. She promptly started instructing him in how to cut it into a square shape. Enalise hadn't spoken for more than thirty seconds before Daven started criticizing her. Everything from her teaching technique to the loose grip she had on her tools. Soon Richter was sighing. The two of them were squabbling as only

academics and tradesmen could. He had to actually make it a formal command to get them to stop fighting like cats in a sack. While that was annoying, he did benefit from the experience.

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Gemcraft**. +2% success of cutting gems. +2% value of cut gems.*

*Congratulations! You have learned the skill: **Jewelry**. +2% value of created jewelry. +2% attractiveness of created jewelry.*

After he gained the skill, Richter went on with the rest of his day. Enalise and Daven started arguing again before he was even ten feet away. He decided he didn't care. What mattered was that he finally had a Template to practice his Crafting skill on, even if it couldn't accommodate more than a level one, rank one enchantment. There was still one more stumbling block though: he didn't know a *Fortify Health* enchantment. Fortunately, his Specialty allowed for a simple solution.

Unfortunately, that simple solution was expensive as hell. Now that he had reached skill level sixteen in Life Magic he was eligible to learn the level fifteen spell, *Weak Fortify Health*. Sumiko was more than happy to teach him the spell... for eight-and-a-half gold. Anyone who thought paying that didn't set him grumbling would be wrong.

When he asked her what she even wanted the gold for, wood sprites

normally being naturally hippie-dippie communists, the Life mage just told him not to worry his pretty head about it. Though he hated forking money over, Richter still didn't complain too much. She had given him a 50% discount as she had sworn fealty. His Trade skill gave him another 8% off. It was also a useful spell.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Weak Fortify Health**.

Casting this spell increases your maximum Health by +50. This is a spell of Life Magic, level 15. Cost: 182 mana. Duration: 30 min. Range: 100 feet. Cast Time: 3 seconds. Cooldown: 1 hour.

Now that he knew the spell, he could use his Essence Specialty to convert it into an enchantment. The cost to do that hurt Richter way more than handing over some gold. It cost fifteen precious Talent Points. Now that he was leveling again, he was extremely hesitant to use Talent Point Conversion to turn his XP into TPs. It was exceedingly useful, but it ground his personal progression to a standstill. The fact that he could also gain Chaos Points when he leveled almost made his mouth water. So instead he dipped into his limited supply of TPs and converted the spell.

*You have: **90 Talent Points** remaining.*

Once he unlocked the enchantment, he chose "Items" as the medium

he wanted to learn and started funneling his mana. The overall cost was fourteen thousand five hundred and sixty MP to convert the spell into an enchantment. With his high mana regen of more than thirty MP/min, it took less than eight hours before he was rewarded with another prompt.

Congratulations! You have learned the enchantment **Fortify Health, Level I**

Enchantment Type: Items

Enchantment Size: 3

Enchantment School: Life

Effect 1: *Increase Maximum Health* – Each rank gives +5 Health.

It was a modest increase, but what was important was that it let him practice his Crafting skill. His subskill Unconventional Materials, that he'd paid for so dearly, hadn't really manifested itself yet except for a faint niggling in the back of his mind while he worked. As no one else in the village had even heard of the subskill, he was on his own.

Richter began making enchanted rings as quickly as he could. Devan was able to make the rings by the dozen and a copper vein had been found months ago in the iron mine. It hadn't been overly large, but it was more than enough to make hundreds of simple bands. The low-level gems were a slight problem, but not really. The local iron mine had been worked for months and gems had been found periodically. After Randolphus had

instituted procedures to ensure that the miners didn't "accidentally" forget to hand the gems over, the village had started building a small stockpile of cheap jewels.

Most weren't worth more than a few silvers, and until now there had been no obvious utility to them. They couldn't even be traded since the village was way out in the middle of nowhere. Now he was going to put them to good use. Which was a good thing, given the fact that Richter wasn't willing to sacrifice the more expensive gems he owned just to fuel his Crafting skill. The only downside was that he couldn't advance the rank of his enchantments that worked on items. The Forge of Heavens let him reach higher ranks of weapon and armor enchantments just by practice. With item enchantments, he was stuck at rank one unless he could get someone to teach him.

After he had made several rings, he found there was another factor he had to face: the quality of the base materials. His forty-nine skill levels in Enchanting increased the +5 health boost of his enchantment to a maximum of +7-8. He found that if Devan made the rings too fast though, the best quality the man could manage was *well crafted* or, worse, *above average*. That seemed to limit the health each ring could provide to +3-4.

If Richter let him take his time though, Devan made *exceptional* or *superb* rings; Richter could then make rings that gave a +5-6 buff. Always

before, the quality of a weapon had only affected the amount of soul stuff Richter could use to power his enchantment. If he used more, the enchantment would be stronger. With item creation, it was apparently more nuanced, and he understood why Enalise had called it more Art than Science. After that discovery, Richter told the Jeweler to focus on quality rather than quantity. When he asked the Crafter why he still wasn't reaching the enchantment's full potential every time, she examined his rings and pointed out places where the script written on the inside of the ring wasn't quite perfect.

Richter had to hold back a massive sigh. Instead, he just reminded himself that there was a large difference between expertise and skill. He had artificially increased his Crafting skill by reading the Unconventional Materials skillbook. It had let him leapfrog possibly years of toil, but that didn't mean he actually had the years of experience he had seen while living those memories. It was the difference between downloading knowledge of an MMA fighter and practicing the moves for years. He still lacked the instincts and muscle memory that would have come from earning the skills the old-fashioned way. Richter was pretty sure the mental pathways to make items perfectly had been laid out in his mind, but he still needed to use them to turn them into easily-used grooves. This wasn't a game where everything came easily. This was The Land.

Despite only knowing one rank of the *Fortify Health* enchantment, Richter wasn't daunted. The health boost was trivial when compared to his hundreds of health, but for many of his villagers, one ring could increase their HP by more than 5%. Even better, the effects stacked if they wore multiple rings. Richter felt good knowing that every item he crafted and enchanted was helping to make his people stronger.

Enalise told him that the true power of Crafting frequently lay not in enchantments but in the materials used. The more powerful and unique the material, the better. Richter immediately thought about the pitted iron sphere that had been found in the rock giant's chest as well as the remains of the abyssal tree they had fought. Sion had brought it back in pieces and they had found in its center a gnarled heart of black wood. It gave off a palpable heat when he placed his hands on it, and it triggered his identify Talent.

You have found: Heart of an Immature Gobrit Tree	Durability: 105/105 Item Class: Unusual Quality: Immature Weight: 1.7 kg Traits: This is the heart of an immature Gobrit Tree. Abyssal power still thrums within it. Planting the heart will grow another Gobrit Tree. It is also possible its energy could be harnessed for other uses.
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He had hoped that either would inspire him to make something, but

apparently just looking at objects was not how it worked. Unfortunately, he just didn't have the time to invest into playing with his new subskill. The *initiate* rank perk of Unconventional Materials let him sub out one item on a Template. He tried using a wooden ring just once, but the item exploded, sending splinters into his face. Since he had been hunched over it at the time, the little *boom* had rung his bell. After that, he decided to wait a bit before experimenting again, or at least until he got some appropriate headgear. Enalise, of course, did not know about his subskill, but she did tell him after his mishap that even with a successful design there was no guarantee that a Template would be produced. It was actually extremely unlikely that one would be. A Template guaranteed that every time one followed a certain series of steps, they would realize a specific outcome. Without a Template, even if Richter did the same process twice, it might not work a second time, something that interested and frustrated him at the same time.

He promised himself that he would devote more time to his Crafting skill after the battle, but there were still many other matters to attend to. A wonderful surprise was that the *journeymen* Hisako had promised to lend to the Mist Village as her part of their trade treaty arrived. In typical fashion, she had gone above and beyond. Rather than simple *journeyman*, four more Professionals took up residence in the village. There was a Bowyer named Kureigu to provide ranged weapons, though he preferred to be called a

Fletcher for some reason. She had also sent for a Farmer to further help the yield of the crops, a Crafter who was more than happy to sit with the scribes and add more Templates to the village library, and most importantly, another Engineer!

Roswan and the gnome Lezli were actually getting along well, though the mustached elf looked pained most of the time. When you added in the new sprite Engineer, they were able to get some serious building done in just a few days!

Each skill rank in Construction that a person reached let them lead a team of five unskilled workers without letting the final quality of their building suffer. At the fourth rank, for instance, each *journeyman* could run a crew of twenty people and the edifice they constructed would still be as strong and high quality as if they had built it alone.

Highly skilled builders could also bring other people that had the Construction skill under their umbrella. Each of these builders could have their own teams, making the lead builder a foreman and each builder under them a crew chief of a sorts. Each rank after *novice* let a builder bring in a crew chief that was equal to or below their level in the skill. As a *journeyman*, that meant Roswan could have three crew chiefs at his rank or lower. Lezli and the sprite Engineer, nicknamed Nitrohawk, were both *journeymen* as well. They could still serve as crew chiefs for the mustached

elf, though they were effectively treated as the next rank down, *apprentices*. That meant each of the crew chiefs could field a team of fifteen people.

With all three of them working together, they were overseeing sixty workers per project. They were able to squeeze a few more workers into the building crew, because two of the other villagers were *initiates* in Construction. There were Talents that Professed Engineers could buy to increase the maximum number of workers or crew chiefs, but neither Engineer had purchased any of those yet.

Richter also got to know Lezli much better over the next few days. Having her in the Job of village Builder was an education, whether you wanted it to be or not. The blond gnome talked non-stop, which seemed a bit manic to Richter. There was no denying though that she was insanely organized. Her binders of notes were even thicker than Randy's.

She cornered him during lunch one day and what she taught the chaos seed, in exacting detail, was that each construction project had a specific number of Building Points that were required to complete it. Someone without the Construction skill could add, at most, half a Building Point, or BP, to a project for each work day. Each *novice* in Construction generated one Building Point for eight hours of work. *Initiate* ranked builders generated two points, *apprentices* three, *journeyman* four, and so on. These points were further increased by the fact that each level someone obtained in

Construction increased their building speed by another 2%. Put another way, a *novice* with skill level two in Construction would generate 1.04 BPs/day, while an *apprentice* with skill level twenty-eight would generate 4.68 BPs/day.

With all three *journeymen* pitching in, the building crew was now generating 89.7 BP/day at baseline. It was a serious improvement over the previous builder team where Roswan had been the only *journeyman* and they had only generated 13.4 BP/day. Basically, they were rocking and rolling! Erecting buildings was not an exact science, of course. The number of Building Points required for a specific edifice was based on an ideal scenario. Being interrupted by inclement weather and workplace injuries, as well as running out of raw materials and making sure that the materials were always close at hand and of good quality, all affected the speed at which a building went up, to name a few factors. Of course, this also assumed that everyone was paying attention and didn't make stupid mistakes. Even in a world as magical as The Land, human error was inevitable. Dwarf, elf and gnome error seemed a sure thing as well. Still, there was no denying how much faster things were getting done now!

Roswan was munching on some eggs while Lezli explained all of this to Richter. When the chaos seed asked why the Engineer hadn't ever explained any of these things before, the elf just shrugged his mustache and

replied, “Grrmmm.” Richter rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to Lezli.

The blond gnome woman showed him how the village’s City Mechanics further increased the building crew’s effectiveness. The Productivity bonus the Mist Village enjoyed was staggering at this point! The settlement’s three ranks in Morale added 20% and the village’s Loyalty added a whopping 70% now that the village had reached the fourth rank, *Trusting*.

As icing on the cake, because Lezli had accepted the Job as village Builder they could count on another +6% to village Productivity applied to building projects. When you factored in the 11% bonus from Richter’s eleven skill levels in Administration, that gave a final boost to Productivity of 107%! His village was producing 185.7 BP each day!

The first project the construction crew tackled was the Townhall. Lezli also taught Richter that it frequently cost a lot less Building Points to repair a building than to build it from scratch. The Goblinhold that had been transported along with the Dungeon was the goblin equivalent of a Townhall and, thanks to Richter’s Limitless ability, could serve the same function in the Mist Village even though it wasn’t a goblin community. The building had suffered a great deal of damage when it was teleported though. It was also almost worthless in its current location outside the village walls. Those

two factors had made Richter worry that the Goblinhold was a lost cause and that it might be a better idea to just build a new Townhall from scratch.

Lezli wouldn't hear a word of it though. The fiery little gnome had just taken it as a challenge and had come up with a plan. The first problem she addressed was the Goblinhold needing to be moved inside the village walls. She examined it closely and found two stress points that let her break the structure into sections. After that, she rolled the three large pieces into the village on cut logs. It cost ninety-eight BPs to accomplish that feat, but it still saved time.

While a level one Townhall made of wood cost five hundred BPs to erect from scratch, the repairs only required one hundred and forty-one. Including the time required to move the Goblinhold, that still meant they spent less than half the time it would have taken to do as Richter had suggested. He was reminded of the true secret of any leader's success: hire people smarter than yourself, then stay the hell out of their way.

The Townhall was finished in two days.

The speed they were building even let Roswan slink off to the Dungeon every night to keep playing with his new Specialty. The overall BP could have been even higher if Richter had personally gotten involved. His Administration skill had a subskill called Lead from the Front. It meant that

any project he was directly involved in got a boost to Productivity. At subskill level five, he could have boosted Productivity by another +5%. His own skill in Construction was a paltry level four though, which basically made him a grunt. He decided that the boost to construction speed wasn't worth sacrificing the eight hours of his day that could be better spent enchanting.

There was another option to improve production time, but he quickly discarded it as well after talking to Randolphus. He could have had his people work longer than an eight-hour day. Time and a half or even double time would have drastically increased the speed buildings went up, and if only done sporadically could be accomplished without any ill effects, especially if Richter paid the workers overtime. If it occurred too often though, there would be consequences. One such problem was that the overall quality of the building might suffer, decreasing its durability and maybe even the perks it gave the village. It could also have rather quick effects on village Morale and long term could even decrease village Loyalty. When Richter heard that, he decided they were building fast enough.

As soon as the Townhall was finished, more functionality became available on Richter's interface. Even better, it let him assign a Town Administrator, a Job that the chamberlain readily accepted.

Congratulations! You have filled another Job. Ran'dolphinius is now the

Town Administrator! *As his Administration skill is even higher than yours, your settlement may now benefit from his skill level of 41!*

+41% to village Morale, Loyalty and Productivity!

Know This! You have assigned a Specialist Spy with a Focus in Counterintelligence as your Town Administrator. For choosing such a uniquely suited individual, the following benefits are now in effect:

- 1) Espionage from foreign settlements is 10% less effective per Townhall level*
- 2) +10 Espionage Points generated by Townhall per day per level*
- 3) Every Diplomat allotted to your settlement allows you to name an equal number of Spies*

As soon as Richter finished reading the prompt he was already envisioning double O's making people disappear. Even though Randolphus was a Professional Spy, he still hadn't really thought too much about espionage. It just didn't fit with his idea of his bucolic village and the monster-filled forests that surrounded it. He definitely didn't want to be the fool that ignored such an important part of his nation's security though.

A thousand questions went through his mind, but the first was what exactly constituted a Diplomat and a Spy. Luckily, Randolphus was close at hand to explain. Both roles were village Jobs. Unlike other Jobs, they did

not directly affect his settlement. Instead, they allowed the men and women assigned to the roles to act on behalf of the village. It also allowed them to use Diplomatic and Espionage Points respectively. As leader of the Mist Village, Richter could expend points from either set as well. Now that Randolphus was Town Administrator, he could do the same. Outside of point usage, Diplomats were public figures while the identities of Spies remained secret for obvious reasons, but if either were caught doing things the settlements they were assigned to found objectionable it could cause a serious hit to the Mist Village's relationship with that community. That was why it was so important to pick the right person for those Jobs.

Diplomats could gradually improve the relationship between two settlements. They also provided valuable intelligence information and could help gain favorable terms in any treaties. In addition to the tasks they could complete, they enjoyed a limited amount of diplomatic immunity. Depending on the situation, Spies could embed themselves in other civilizations and use Espionage Points to make their missions more likely to succeed. They could develop assets, steal technologies and perform any number of other missions.

Randolphus told him that although his Spy Specialty was heavily synergistic with the Job of Spy, anyone could fill the Job, though of course some were better suited than others. The newly designated Town Administrator said he already had his eye on a few possible candidates for the

positions and would prepare assignments for all of them.

As interesting as all that was, what had Richter doing a fist pump was the 41% boost to Morale, Loyalty and Productivity! His village was now benefiting from Randy's one hundred years of experience serving as the palace chamberlain in Law. During that time, the Spy had advanced his Administration skill all the way to level forty-one! The bonus wasn't enough to increase the village's Morale or Loyalty in rank again, but the Productivity buff was immediately useful. When the +6% bonus to Construction Productivity from having Lezli accept the Job as village Builder was factored in, total village Productivity increased to +137%, yielding 212.6 Building Points a day!

Richter had promptly given Randolphus a high five, and asked why they hadn't done this before. The chamberlain either ignored his liege's sarcasm or didn't get it. "My lord, it was necessary to wait until you reached the *initiate* rank of your own Administration skill, and to speak plainly, you have never expressed a desire to be involved in the day-to-day business of running the village. This slowed your progression."

Richter's mouth twisted ruefully at the recrimination. The man wasn't wrong.

"Also," Randolphus continued, "I have served several lords before

you and have learned that asking for more power can be an easy road to the hangman's noose." His gaze grew intent and serious, "When I swore my loyalty to you, I meant every word, my lord. I am honored that you would trust me with the role of Town Administrator, and I hope you know that I would never seek to betray you."

"Unless it conflicts with that one Vow you made before that you can't tell me about," Richter couldn't help but adding.

With an unwavering gaze, Randolphus simply answered, "Yes."

Richter heaved a heavy sigh. That secret Vow was like an invisible wedge between them. Wedge or not though, it was becoming increasingly clear that the chamberlain might literally be indispensable at this point. Also, the only reason Richter even knew about the Vow was that Randolphus had told him about it. The trained Spy could have just lied or obfuscated the truth. Instead, he'd been straight up with Richter. Also, for whatever reason, the Universe had made them Companions. That meant their goals aligned, at least for now. Richter felt that that had to mean something.

"Do you wish to remove me from my position?" the Spy asked quietly, interrupting Richter's reflections.

"No," the chaos seed had replied firmly. Then the two of them shook hands and got back to work.

The Townhall opened up a host of other options for Richter. After reading the list, he realized Randolphus was right. He had been an absolute fool for not building a Townhall first!

*Know This! You have built a fully functional **Townhall (Goblinhold) (Level 1)**. Your settlement will now enjoy the Building Bonuses from having such a building. It is only due to your Limitless ability that you may use a goblin building in this capacity. Truly you are fortunate, for you will now benefit from both the human and goblin settlement bonuses.*

- 1) Can assign the Job: **Town Administrator***
- 2) Diplomacy Points can now be collected. Max: **1000 DP/Foreign Settlement***
- 3) The max level of buildings in your settlement has increased to the level of your **Townhall +1** (Current Max Building Level: 2)*
- 4) You may now institute taxes with decreased Morale and Loyalty Penalties*
 - 1. 1-5% Taxation = **No Penalty***
 - 2. Each 1% increases Penalty until reaching 10% Taxation = **-50% Penalty***
 - 3. >10% Taxation = **Full Penalty***
- 5) Increases Loyalty and Morale by **+1/day** (Max Change: +1,000 Points each)*

1. *Can now know daily rate change in City Mechanics*

6) *Informs the ruler of the settlement as to average change in settlement Mechanics (Morale, Loyalty, Health, Commerce, etc) on a day by day basis (base without changes)*

1. *Loyalty: +1.03*

2. *Morale: + 1.2*

3. *Health: - 0.02*

4. *Commerce: ---*

5. *Corruption: ---*

7) *Can Assign 2 Diplomats and 2 Spies. Each Diplomat has +1 Relationship rank with other settlements*

8) *Provides*

1. *100 units of storage space*

2. *Housing for 25 people (Adequate housing Quality)*

9) *Can now generate specific quests. 100 XP generated daily which can be used as a reward.*

As Town Administrator, Randolphus received the same notification as Richter. These were the generic bonuses any Settlement would gain from having a Townhall, but there were also specific benefits from converting a captured Goblinhold.

1) *Having such an impressive settlement center causes your people to*

be 5% less likely to revolt or plot against you

2) Affixing the remains of conquered foes will inspire your people and provide bonuses to your populace. Max: 2 Trophies

When Richter initially read the last prompt, he really hadn't been overly interested in attaching decaying flesh or old bones to his Townhall, but Randolphus confirmed there could be great benefit in doing so. He'd actually already had the builders remove a few bones that had been affixed to the building. Of course, he had thought they were just macabre decorations. Once the Goblinhold was repaired, putting the old bones back did nothing. Roswan guessed that was because the villagers had not claimed the trophies themselves. That gave Richter an idea, though.

Thirty minutes later, Richter stood in front of the Townhall with the leg bones of an old nemesis and a complaining necromancer to boot. He had previously allowed Beyan to commandeer the remains of the rock giant to see if he could make anything out of them. The gnome apparently thought it was unfair Richter was now taking them back, especially since his pet decaemur knight was about to be sacrificed. The chaos seed ignored the protests. He'd only taken the leg bones. Beyan still had the arm bones and the giant's crown, heart, and skin to play with.

A short time later, the two bones were affixed in an "X" above the main entrance. Richter smiled as he gained a new prompt.

*Truly you have triumphed over a mighty foe. The fact that this was a **Mortal Enemy** doubles the bonus to your settlement. +2 (base +1) Strength to every member of your village!*

That bonus was not only awesome, it earned him another boost to Morale!

+40 Morale Points for boosting the Strength of your settlement by +2.

Base: **+877** x 1.84 (+25% Undefeated x +41% Administrator x +10% Health x -2% Crime x +10% Vassal State)

Total Morale Points: **+1,614**

+200 personal **Relationship Points** with every villager.

It felt a bit like he would never get to rank four in the village's Morale, Richter thought sourly. If he hadn't accepted the freed prisoners into the village's population, he probably would have reached that milestone already. Then again, the former captives had also increased the number of hands to help out in the village and had brought him several new Professionals to boot. All in all, Richter was more than satisfied with his choice to grow his settlement's population. And really, with all of his choices so far... minus one or two drunken moments, but hey, he was an American. Shit yeah!

Richter tried one or two other "remains." He brought out a bag of

condensed powdered crystal, hoping that the crystal guardian would trigger something. Apparently rendering a foe's body into dust made it ineligible for this particular perk, because nothing happened. Richter thought about a few other enemies, the crypt mistress, the dark aberration, Nien the Reaver... It only took about ten seconds for him to decide against anointing his new Townhall with any of those. Even though the rock giant had been a twenty-foot tall cock, it hadn't necessarily been evil. His other noteworthy foes though, were seriously bad mojo.

He wasn't sure what perk might come from such *evil* remains, and he wasn't willing to risk that it might irrevocably change his village for the worse. Richter was pretty sure a goblin chief might consider making his people more ruthless or bloodthirsty a good thing, but he did not. Until he could learn more about this particular perk, he told the builders that he only wanted to put *neutral* aligned enemies up as trophies. To himself, he added *good* enemies would work in a pinch as well.

There was one more prompt that came from building his Townhall, something that he hadn't expected but was perhaps the most exciting development!

Greetings, Master of the Mist Village! For building a settlement center, you may now decide what type of ruler path you will follow. Your people will follow your direction and act accordingly. The following options are based

on your own proclivities as a ruler. You may now choose a specialization for your village!

Richter's eyes grew wide as the options were laid out in front of him.

Ruler Path (Prereqs)	Ruler Bonus *cumulative with Settlement Bonus	Settlement Bonus	Method of Advancement
Technocrat (Ruler has Research skill)	+100% or +1 Research Points generated even when not actively involved in research (whichever is greater)	+10% Research Points +1% chance of having an Epiphany	Research 10 techs
Summoner (Summoned creatures used at least 50% of the time in the settlement)	+2 level increase of summoned creatures	Creatures summoned inside settlement domain +50% stronger and last +50% as long	Summon at least 10 creatures in the settlement for 100 days in a row
Diplomat (Ruler has Diplomacy skill)	1 day of Diplomatic immunity with enemy settlements. 1 week of Diplomatic immunity with	+10% Relationship Points with other settlements +10 Diplomatic Points per day with settlements which have <i>Friendly</i> or better relationships with your settlement (Max:	Form at least <i>Friendly</i> or better relationships with 10 or more settlements

	neutral settlements. Can use once per month.	500) +1 Relationship rank with other settlements	
Warmonger (Ruler has War Leader skill)	+ 10% XP from slain enemies	+10% XP from slain enemies +1 Fighting Spirit rank	Kill 1,000 enemy creatures
Merchant (Ruler has Trade Skill)	+10% Better Prices, Buying and Selling	+10% better terms during Trade Agreements. Other settlements more likely to enter into Trade Agreements.	Form 10 Trade Agreements
Explorer (Ruler has personally discovered 5 Locations)	+10% Movement Speed	+10% Movement Speed for every villager +10% chance to find Locations -10% chance of monster attacks	Find 10 Locations, <i>Interesting</i> or <i>Higher</i>
Lover (Ruler has Charisma > 20)	+10% Charisma +50% more fertile	+10% Population Growth +10% Morale	Increase Population by +10%
Alchemist (Ruler has Alchemy Skill)	+10% Potion effect	+10% Potion effect +10% Chance of successful potion completion +1% chance to make new Recipes	Brew 1,000 potions
Master Mage (Ruler has a	-10% mana cost for all spells	+10% Mana for all villagers Increased magic skill affinity for	10% of all villagers become at

Place of Power)		villagers	least <i>Novice</i> casters
Enchanter (Ruler has Enchanting Skill)	+10% Enchantment Points per captured soul +10% chance of Enchantment success	+10% chance of captured souls being upgraded by one rank	Capture 1,000 souls <i>common</i> rank or better
Fighter (Ruler has Martial Skill)	+10% Health	+10% skill progression for martial skills Increased magic skill affinity for villagers	10% of all villagers become at least <i>Novice</i> fighters
Adventurer (Ruler is a Dungeon Master)	+10% Attack and Defense while in Dungeon or Labyrinth +10% chance to find Nodes	+10% Dungeon Points from any source +10% Dungeon Loot	Generate 1,000 Dungeon Points
Hunter (Ruler has Tracking Skill)	+10% Attack and Defense against creatures in your domain	+10% chance to find Dens, Nests, Lairs, etc. +10% Attack and Defense against creatures in the domain of the settlement	Accumulate 1000 Hunter Points 1 point per Den 10 points per Nest 100 points per Lair, etc.
Armorer (Ruler has Smithing)	+10% Attack and Defense	+10% smithing Productivity +10% Attack and	Forge 1,000 weapons

Skill)		Defense of forged items	
Benevolent Ruler (Settlement has Morale rank 2 or higher)	+10 Relation Points per day with villagers who have sworn fealty	+10 Morale Points per day +10% chance for villagers to swear fealty	Earn 1,000 Morale Points

As soon as Richter saw the extensive table he was overcome with two emotions. The first, predictably, was irritation. Why hadn't anyone told him that building a Townhall would let him specialize the village?! If he had a Dr. Evil conference table, he would seriously be pushing some buttons and cooking some fools!

Since he lacked said table, or even electricity, or a volcano lair to drop said henchmen into, he moved onto his next emotion, which was pure fucking awe. He was overwhelmed by the sheer number of choices and the benefits each could bring to his people! So much so that he sought out help from the best authority he knew on such matters.

"I am relieved that you finally constructed a settlement center," Hisako told him in a slightly judgmental voice.

Richter's hand slowly curled into claws, and he bit back the criticism that she could have told him how important it was. "Me too...now, what can you tell me?"

Hisako eyeballed him for a second, having totally caught his tone, but she answered anyway. “The choice of specialization is a serious one, Lord Richter. Each level your village achieves allows you to choose an additional specialization, but once made, the choice can never be undone.”

“Well, what did you choose to specialize in?” Richter asked.

She regarded him for a moment, but ultimately answered, “We are Earth Guardians. The benefits are subtle at first but, just as in nature, from tiny acorns do massive oaks grow. Our specialization has given us a profound connection with nature and allows our trees to grow strong.”

Richter thought about what she had said. He didn’t have the Earth Guardian option so he couldn’t know the specifics, but he could see how it would be the perfect choice for the sprites. They were bonded to nature and preservation of the natural order was almost a religion to them. The more he thought about it, the more a few unanswered questions seemed to fall into place. The wood sprites had an ability, Woodcraft. It let them literally disappear into the trees. It also let them move through the woods as fast as if they were running down a paved road. Some of the other races of sprites didn’t have that though. Hill sprites definitely didn’t and even a few of the forest sprites had lacked it. Every single wood sprite did have the ability though... was that a perk of their settlement specialization?

Richter also reflected on what Hisako had said about the specialization making trees grow strong. The Hearth Tree was the single largest structure he had come across since coming to The Land. The thing was so big it boggled the mind. It was just a guess, but he thought it was over two hundred stories tall. Richter had always thought it had grown that large because it was built on a Place of Power, but maybe that wasn't the whole story. Maybe whatever high level her settlement had achieved in its specialty had also played a role. That kind of information would be valuable and possibly compromising. He suddenly knew why she had hesitated before telling him.

He bowed his head and, in a serious tone, thanked her for sharing such an intimate piece of information.

She smiled warmly, pleased that Richter had understood the trust she was showing him.

“Well, do you have any advice for me?” he asked.

“Yes, but I will not tell you specifically what to do,” she told him simply. “Your village is a reflection of you. My counsel is that you ask yourself, who do you want to become? What do you want your village and its people to become? Trust yourself, young lord, and the decision will become clear.” With that pronouncement, she had walked off.

Richter had mulled over both her words and his options for a long while before making his decision. The problem was that so many of them made sense. The first, *Technocrat*, would give a serious boost to the village's Research. They had only just scratched the surface of that particular facet of the settlement and Richter was sure there would be awesome bonuses later as they learned more techs. It was a late-game play, something that fit with his general approach when he'd been a gamer. The problem was, in the last few months, he had found that approach just couldn't be applied all the time in real life. When you were gaming, the biggest consequence of losing was having to buy a round of beers for your friends. In real life, ignoring the needs of today could get people killed.

On the other side of the spectrum, *Warmonger*, *Master Mage*, *Alchemist*, *Armorer* and *Hunter* all gave immediate benefits. They made his people tougher, stronger and more likely to survive in the harsh environment of the forest. *Hunter* especially was attractive. Finding nests and dens was something Richter worried about in the back of his head. If he hadn't found the assengai spider nest before those thousands of spiders had hatched... the thought made him shudder. And that was only one example. If *any* type of lair went unchecked, hordes of monsters could sweep over the village in a wave of death. The best strategy, by far, was to clear out pockets of breeding monsters before they could become entrenched and proliferate out of control.

That was, of course, easier said than done. Finding them was a matter of Luck as much as skill sometimes.

While all of those choices could offer real benefits, Richter realized that the village already had perks that gave them an edge in battle, the biggest being the Forge of Heavens and the enchanted weapons and armor that were made there. Which of course brought to mind the *Enchanter* specialization. That settlement bonus, upgrading captured souls, was amazing. There was a pretty steady stream of *basic* and *common* souls being brought into the village now thanks to the *Soul Trap* arrows Richter was making. Higher level souls, *luminous* or *brilliant* rank, for example, were much harder to come by. If the *common* souls obtained from average strength monsters were periodically bumped up to *luminous*, that would be a game changer! It would let Richter make stronger enchantments, which in turn would make his people deadlier by far.

The con to that though was that he and Gloran were the only two people in the village with a high skill level in Enchanting. If Richter was apart from the village for an extended period of time, that would mean only one person in a thousand would really benefit from the specialization.

Diplomat would prove useful, especially since the village's boat would be finished any day now. Ideally, he would meet other settlements soon and it would be great to have a boost in negotiations. As nice as that

sounded though, Richter already knew diplomacy wasn't his strong suit. Same with *Merchant*. He definitely loved a good deal, but trade would always be a means to an end, not the real purpose of his life or his village.

Summoner was fascinating. He would love to have the personal bonus to his summoning magic. His minions being two levels higher would really increase their battle capabilities, and it might even be good for the mist workers he summoned on a daily basis. It really didn't fit the needs of the village as a whole though, at least not yet.

Richter's eyes lingered on *Lover* for a bit. That could definitely be fun, but he was already kind of up to his neck in pootie tang. Also, the 50% more fertile thing was not his idea of awesome. He was already downing enough star zenia that it might start sprouting from his ass. He had prayed more than once that the herb didn't have any weird side effects. Still, even if it did, better some pube loss or minor brain damage than a bunch of bambinos bouncing around, in Richter's opinion.

Benevolent Ruler was definitely the safe choice. A daily boost to Morale would be great. The personal boost to his relationship with every villager would have many positive long-term effects as well. Overall, his people definitely liked him, but it hadn't escaped Richter's notice that he was leading a settlement of over a thousand now. If even 1% of them were plotting against him, it could lead to all manner of trouble.

Richter mulled it over for the rest of the day and discussed it with Randolphus. The Spy advised him to look at it from another angle. It wasn't just the initial perks of a specialization that needed to be considered. It was the difficulty in leveling each path as well. *Technocrat*, for instance, required that the village research ten techs after choosing his specialization. That could take an entire year. They had battles to fight now and enemies that were probably plotting against them every day. If leveling was as important as Randolphus said, then choosing research as a specialization was definitely not the best choice.

That sage advice narrowed it down for Richter. Of all the options, the two that had really caught his eye were *Enchanter* and *Adventurer*. Both would be easy for him to level, something that Randolphus promised would open more options down the road. The chamberlain couldn't say exactly what leveling would do, as it was unique for each settlement, but he guaranteed there would be interesting opportunities as the village progressed down its chosen path.

Enchanter would be great for Richter personally. It would increase his power and the capabilities of his Profession. That in turn would strengthen the village, albeit indirectly. *Adventurer* on the other hand would increase the power of anyone he allowed into the Dungeon. Richter had already decided to make access as widely available to his sworn people as

was safe. That meant potentially hundreds of people could benefit from the *Adventurer* specialization every day.

Randolphus had told him that he didn't know of any other settlements that had been offered the Adventurer Specialization. There were obviously Dungeons in other cities, and the Dungeon in Law was reported to have predated the city, but apparently Law had chosen the *Conqueror* settlement specialization. It provided significant bonuses when they invaded and attacked other peoples. Randolphus pointed out that the founders of Law might also not have been given the choice since they had never been Dungeon Masters.

The chamberlain seemed quite excited about the possibilities of choosing the path of the Adventurer. He pointed out that having a rare specialization might also give rare bonuses to the settlement. Randy also reminded him that the Dungeon was already making over a hundred and eighty Dungeon Points a day. With another 10% boost, the specialization would level in less than a week!

There were a thousand reasons to pick each specialty, but he realized that Hisako's initial advice would be his guiding light. Who *did* he want to be? Would he choose something that would only make him stronger, or would he choose something that would make his people more powerful? When he realized that was the real choice he was making, a smile bloomed

on his face. The choice wasn't really a choice at all. He chose his people.
He chose adventure!

The Path of the **Adventurer!**

Your people will follow your example and be driven to take chances and push their limits. The call of Adventure is not safe, but those who survive walking it will be the strongest version of themselves! Watch well, for though your people will surely change over the years to come, the shift may also occur in the blink of an eye!

Specialization Level: 1 *“An adventure, you say?”*

Ruler Bonus:

+10% Attack and Defense while in a Dungeon or the Labyrinth

+10% chance to find Nodes

Settlement Bonus:

+10% Dungeon Points from any source

+10% Dungeon Loot

Leveling Conditions:

Generate 0/1,000 Dungeon Points

Despite his massive amount of deliberation, nothing immediately changed in the village. As the days went on though, Richter didn't forget the quasi-warning that the very nature of his people might be altered because of his choices.

The Townhall wasn't the only building completed while the village

prepared for war. The builders also created more housing for the village's burgeoning population in relatively short order. Each wooden longhouse only required one hundred and twenty Building Points to complete, start to finish. There was more than enough wood, tar and thatch to accomplish the task and, with the construction crew making 212.6 BP/day the village was able to build almost two a day.

Richter told the builders to keep focused on erecting long houses until they reached the magic number of sixteen. That was the amount required to house everyone in the village, minus the pixies of course, in *adequate* conditions. It would put just under sixty people under each roof. That obviously wasn't an adequate long-term solution. Richter wanted to start building individual homes at some point, but for now it would do.

As soon as the first longhouse was completed, Richter gained a well-appreciated notification window.

*The **Housing** available is now above 50% capacity for your population. Pay heed, ruler: you must provide housing before the weather turns or you will suffer further penalties without further warning. Rule Well!*

To the chaos seed, it looked like after long months of prep and battle, his village was finally coming alive! Every day, his people were engaged in growing the community. It was a moment of incredible satisfaction. He had

taken many risks and had predicated his dream of a village on a diverse population working together, made stronger by their differences. There had been consequences, both personal and public. People had died, and the wounds those losses had wreaked on his heart were still not healed. He had needed to make sacrifices and there were times that he felt like giving up. Looking at his people now though, united in purpose even with battle on the horizon, Richter knew he had made the right choice in putting his faith in hope, rather than giving in to his fears.

CHAPTER 86 – Day 148 – Kuborn 38, 0 AoC



It wasn't just the surface of the village that changed over three days. The increased Luck of the village affected everything. That was why, halfway through the third day, Bartle and Bea came running up to the Forge of Heavens, looking for Richter. Krom started shouting at them for rushing into his domain just before the chaos seed saw them. Both Scholars ignored the dwarf and Bartle shouted, "Eureka!"

Richter's face wrinkled in confusion. Not because he didn't understand the word, but he just didn't understand how the Scholar knew the word. Wasn't it specific to Earth? Then he thought about it: maybe not. He'd looked it up once and it was just "thought" to be attributed to Archimedes. Maybe "Eureka" was ubiquitous. Then again, Bartle was talking in commonspeak and maybe it was just the equivalent word that Richter was hearing. Then again, maybe he'd just let his ADD get away from him again. He was pretty sure it was the last option, because the Scholar talked for an entire minute without Richter hearing a word thanks to

his shortbus stream-of-consciousness moment.

After asking Bartle to repeat himself, Richter found out that one of the village researchers had had an Epiphany. Ever since building the House of Scholarship, there had been a +1.2% chance of the village having a scientific breakthrough. Bea explained that the closer a tech got to being fully researched, the higher the chance of a member of the research team having an “aha” moment. An Epiphany wasn’t just a lucky break though, it was actual magic at work.

Apparently, the researcher in question had, for a moment, quite literally glowed. Then the scroll the researchers had been recording their progress on had started to glow as well. The missing information was filled in as the Universe awarded the research team the remaining fifty-one Research Points needed to finish. With an excited grin, Bartle handed Richter the scroll and a prompt appeared as he unrolled it.

Know This! Anyone relevant who belongs to your settlement will now be able to access this information!

Congratulations! You have researched: **Predict Auspicious Times I**

Your people can now predict specific cosmic alignments that will give extra effects to weapons and armor that are created in the Forge of Heavens. You are guaranteed to identify at least **1** instance per month. It

will also give hints to the specific circumstances required to trigger these effects. This tech will only work inside the Core building and will only predict up to one month in advance.

You have researched **1 of 7** ranks of this tech. Researching higher ranks will extend the range of your predictive ability and allow for a greater number of auspicious times to be predicted each month. As of now, only you have access to the bonuses provided by this tech. Access the interface of the Forge of Heavens to provide access to others.

Richter immediately accessed his interface and gave access to Krom. He also made sure that Krom would be able to extend permission to whomever the dwarf saw fit. The Smith wasn't close by, but the chaos seed chuckled as he thought about how Krom's salt-and-pepper beard was probably splitting with a grin as he read the prompt. Hopefully this would give his villagers an even greater advantage in battle.

Being guaranteed only one "auspicious time" a month didn't seem like much, but the benefits of triggering the Core building's special ability gave unique bonuses. If he was reading it right, the number of predicted alignments wasn't limited to one a month; it was that *at least* one auspicious occasion per month would be foreseen. With luck there might be more. He

could also research the second rank of the tech if he wanted to improve the odds of getting a special weapon or piece of armor.

Finishing the research begged an obvious question. What tech would they unlock next? Richter accessed the research tab on his village interface. He was once again humbled by the vast sea of knowledge that existed. The science interface looked like a miniaturized version of the village sitting like a bubble underneath a sea of grey mist. Around it, eight spheres hovered, pushing back the fog. Two of these spheres were glowing, indicating that they had been researched. More globes branched off them, also pushing back the mist.

Saying he had barely scratched the surface of available techs was generous. When Richter zoomed out, it became clear that the science his village had access to was less than 1% of 1% of 1% ad infinitum. Research was another area where his Limitless ability gave the village an advantage. Most settlements were restricted from researching techs because they were specific to other races. Elves could not research minotaur-specific techs, for instance. His ability removed that restriction. The Mist Village could one day become the most knowledgeable settlement in The Land, but, of course, that possible future would still require blood, sweat, tears and massive amounts of time.

Zooming out on the science interface also showed the one other open

spot that had been cleared in the ocean of grey mist. The area around his miniature village and this other area lit up like lamps seen far away on an especially foggy night. The second set showed the knowledge he'd been given by the Tefonim queen about building portals. As he was the Master of his settlement, it was also added to the research interface. Unfortunately, he couldn't just add the tech of anyone else to the village.

Randolphus, for instance, had paid close attention to the inner workings of Yves' monarchy for nearly a century. While he wasn't a Professed Scholar, the Spy had told Richer that he did understand a good deal about certain technologies. The village couldn't access his expertise though, not until certain prerequisite techs had been researched. The chamberlain wasn't the only one who had knowledge that could help the village.

Enalise had revealed that she understood the tech *Mining I* well enough to benefit the village. As the precursor to that tech had not been revealed yet though, it was only of use to her alone. The other thing that complicated the issue was that each settlement had a unique approach to knowledge. The starting tech a community had access to varied due to the race of the settlement, its location and many other factors. While in some communities Mining might be one of the first techs made available, in the Mist Village it might be revealed by researching Farming I, or it might not be revealed until a series of other technologies had been researched first.

Randolphus told him that anyone who had a formal Job in the village would automatically advance techs once they were revealed, almost like a freebie reward for choosing the right people to take positions of responsibility in his village. Making the chamberlain Town Administrator would yield massive gains in research in the months and years to come, but until the prereqs were researched the technology and the perks it offered remained frustratingly beyond reach.

Richter wasn't one to dwell though. Instead he focused on what he could do. He immediately dismissed the idea of researching any more portal technologies. The cheapest among them required nearly thirty-three thousand Research Points. A quick check of his village's research potential showed that pursuing any of those would be a long wait for a train don't come.

Available Research Points (RP): 0

Daily Earned Research: 14.63 RP/day

1) **1 Point per Ley Lines: 4 Total**

2) **0.1 Points per level of Research Skill*: 9.3**

Research Rate Modifiers: +10% rate for House of Scholarship (level 1)

*Normal research restrictions apply

Instead, he focused on the techs branching off from the representation of the village. Each tech showed up on the interface as a globe. They were

also assigned a “tier” which showed how many connections they were removed from the miniature village on the science screen. All he could see were the techs branching off the village or techs that had already been researched. He never knew if advancing the village’s knowledge would reveal five new options, as had happened when he’d researched the *Forge of Heavens* tech, or if it would be a dead end, like what had just happened with *Predict Auspicious Times I*. The village’s latest scientific advance had revealed no further science spheres, but the name of the sphere had changed to *Predict Auspicious Times II*, allowing the village to research the second rank of the tech.

MIST VILLAGE SCIENCE TREE			
TECH	COST	TIER	DESCRIPTION/REQUIREMENTS
Farming I	89	1	Increases yield from cultivated crops by 5% total.
Animal Husbandry I	102	1	Increases the health of your animals by 5%. Usable products from domesticated animals are also increased by 5%. <u>*Requires your settlement to have domesticated animals.</u>

Soldiery I	98	1	<p>Increases the learning curve of your soldiers by 10%. Also increases attack and defense of trained soldiers by 5%.</p> <p><u>*Requires a barracks.</u> UNAVAILABLE!</p>
Construction I	132	1	<p>Increases building speed and building durability by 5%.</p> <p><u>*Requires a workshop.</u></p> <p>This Tech provides new blueprints!</p> <p>Mason's Shop (level 1): When built, will decrease waste and increase efficiency when quarrying stone. Increases usable yield of local quarries by 10%. Increases productivity when quarrying stone by 10%.</p> <p>Logging Camp (level 1): When built, will decrease waste and increase efficiency when logging. Increases usable yield of local wooded areas by 10%.</p>

			Increases productivity when harvesting forests by 10%.
Enchantments I	61	1	Opens the possibility of learning, altering and creating basic enchantments.
Astronomy II	104	1	Gives a basic idea of the movement of the stars, planets, and other cosmic bodies.
Astrology I	89	2	Gives a rudimentary understanding of how the movements of the cosmos can predict events in The Land.
Forge of Heavens	---	2	Unlocks a branch of research that is specific to your Core building, the Forge of Heavens. (Unique)
Learn Enchantments I	294	3	Increases the chance of the Forge learning new enchantments by 5%
Predict Auspicious Times II	204	3	Provides increased knowledge of specific dates and times to forge weapons and

			armor in order to obtain extra effects (at least 2 a month)
Elementum Bonus to Spell Barriers I	438	3	Increases the spell barrier penetration of Forge of Heaven weapons by 20%
Elementum Bonus to Spell Resistance I	437	3	Increases the spell resistance given to each piece of armor by 2%
Basic Spell Theory I	56	1	Provides a basic understanding of the magic of the Basic Elements and ley lines.
Metallurgy II	214	1	Decreases the amount of metal needed to make arms and armor by 10%. (Tech advanced by one level due to inherent knowledge of villager in the Job: Smith) <u>*Requires access to smithy.</u>
Alloy I	202	2	Increases the likelihood of discovering new alloys with increased capabilities when experimenting with new combinations of metals. Increases the

			<p>durability and either attack or defense of new alloys by 10%.</p> <p><u>*Requires: Access to smithy + metals necessary for experimentation.</u></p> <p><u>**Metals used in this research will be slowly consumed.</u></p>
Smelter I	254	2	<p>Increases heat in the smelter, allowing for greater malleability of worked metals.</p> <p>Increases production speed of forged items by 10%.</p>
Smithing Tools I	207	2	<p>Increases the caliber of all smithing tools by 10%. Increases the chance of your smiths to create arms and armor of higher quality by 10%.</p>

The fact that there were so many techs available was too much of a good thing. He was almost grateful that researching *Predict Auspicious Times I* hadn't revealed more options. Richter also decided not to invest more precious Research Points into that branch of science until he saw how it manifested itself. Similarly, the other three tier-3 technologies that branched

off the *Forge of Heavens* tech were a bit too specialized in Richter's opinion. He wanted the next scientific breakthrough to help the village as a whole. The same argument applied to the tier-2 knowledge stemming from *Metallurgy* and *Astronomy*. That left the six tier-1 techs.

Richter didn't deliberate long. Really, there was only one option that made sense. His village was exploding with high Productivity, but there was still a great deal to do and build. He decided to keep the good times rolling.

The Mist Village has begun research on **Construction I**

Progression: 0/132 RPs.

Predicted time to completion: 9 days, 32 minutes and 29 seconds

Rewards:

Increases building speed and building durability by 5%.

This Tech provides new Blueprints.

Mason's Shop (level 1): When built, will decrease waste and increase efficiency when quarrying stone. Increases usable yield of local quarries by 10%. Increases productivity when quarrying stone by 10%.

Logging Camp (level 1): When built, will decrease waste and increase efficiency when logging. Increases usable yield of local wooded areas by 10%. Increases productivity when harvesting forests by 10%.

The village wouldn't finish the new research until after the battle with the lich lord, but nine days wasn't that long. Once the tech was known, it would not only boost the speed that buildings went up, it would also make two precious Blueprints available. Both level one buildings would increase the village's efficiency even further. Richter had a feeling that very soon, his village was going to undergo a mini industrial revolution.

Even before the buildings were completed, the influx of Professionals started changing the village in strange and unexpected ways. The first thing people noticed was the boost to meals they consumed every day. The new Cook, a high elf named Takko, had bought a Talent called *Natural Flavor*. Every meal tasted significantly more savory. The improved food caused a +0.1 uptick in the daily Morale changes that Richter could see since the Townhall had been built.

Everybody's day was better with good grub. The Cook didn't know any Recipes yet, but he was determined to learn some. The good news was it was much easier for Cooks to discover new Recipes than it was for Crafters to discover new Templates or for Smiths to discover new Schematics. The bad news was Takko's experiments led to some negative gastrointestinal consequences. Richter had to stop Krom from beating the man with his hammer after a meal involving dung moth wings caused a burning case of

“mud butt.” The chaos seed actually made it a royal decree that that particular ingredient was never to be used again. The experience wasn’t a complete loss though: the Smith’s threats prompted Takko to buy two ranks in the *Culinary Invention* Talent which significantly increased his chances of creating his own Recipes.

The elven Cook was also able to create an open quest for any herb gatherers or hunters who brought him ingredients that were *uncommon* ranked or above. The XP the quest provided was apparently only in the ten to twenty range, but as it was repeatable, the Cook was already helping to level the village as a whole.

The only downside, in Richter’s opinion at least, were Takko’s “experiments.” The first problem came when the elf served something he called “three penis soup” as an after dinner snack. There were so many complaints that the chaos seed had to take time out of his day to figure out what was in it. The elf revealed that it was a chowder of sorts made using squirrel penis, badger penis and deer penis. He did admit that the deer penis was doing most of the work. Richter was so horrified that he’d just walked away. On day three though, he put his foot down. A “royal” decree was proclaimed stating that fermented liver was not to be served at any meal, no matter what animal it came from!

The other Professionals also made their presence known. Miniquests

were popping up all over the place, but there were also direct effects. Joseph the Chandler started rendering animal fat and local flowers into candles. He bought a Talent, *Fragrant Smoke*, that magnified the scent coming off his burning candles. It did a great deal to help the funk factor in some of the longhouses, which also increased the Morale of the village by +0.03/day. Jeremiah the Soaper helped in that regard as well. The two men actually worked side by side in making their items. Jeremiah purchased a Talent called *Clean Living* so anyone that washed with his soaps got a bonus to their health. It helped ameliorate the daily decline in village Health that came from having so many people living in one place. When the Soaper handed out the first batch of his product, Richter could see the daily Health change in the Townhall interface improve from -0.02/day to -0.01/day.

The Lumberjack, Berin, purchased two Talents immediately, *Axeman* and *Boarding*. The first increased the speed with which he could harvest trees and the second let him turn each length of tree into four usable units rather than just two. Berin also triggered a new settlement quest for Richter: to make a sawmill which when completed should help to advance the chaos seed's Administration skill.

Shiovana dove back into building Richter's warship with gusto and told him that it would be ready in two weeks or less. It would already be done, but she had taken very seriously his instruction to change the vessel

from the trade barge it had initially been designed as into a warship. She promised it would be a strong weapon of war when she was done.

The Sailor, Jerry, was already working with a few villagers and teaching them the basics of seamanship in anticipation of getting on the water. Once the ship was ready, Richter wanted to start exploring the surrounding territory by boat. Then, when the crew was confident in their capabilities, at long last it would be time for a trading mission. Either to Yves or the wood elf kingdom that Hisako had mentioned, or perhaps all the way down to the southern tip of the River Peninsula to open relations with the island kingdoms, The Twins.

The newly-minted Miner, Poltan, and the recently freed Miner, Enalise, were both leading teams in the iron mine. That, of course, led to a renewed request to clear the second level of the mine. The first floor had been cleared of monsters, and Terrod had assigned a strike team to patrol it regularly, but the second floor still needed to be secured. Richter promised them that it would be a priority after the lich was dealt with.

Gloran had become a regular fixture in the Forge of Heavens and already had several new enchantments, including *Life Attack*. He could only enchant up to rank one, but he was practicing every day to progress to rank two. The elven Enchanter had invested his Talent Points into *Increase Enchantment Potential* and was saving up to purchase *Increase Number of*

Enchantments so that he could dual enspell like Richter. He also volunteered to go hunting with the warbands each day so that he could power level and earn more Talent Points. It was a profound relief to Richter having someone else to shoulder the enchanting load each day.

The Maid, Tifini, quickly became a favorite around the village. Her *Launder* Talent not only made the village washing go faster each day but also restored some durability points to people's clothes. As most of the villagers owned only one set, that was huge. She also organized several other villagers into a cleaning squad. Her *Head Matron* Talent allowed her to organize a team of workers beneath her much as Roswan could organize builders. The four-man team washed and scrubbed with all the perks of her *journeyman* skill rank in Cleaning. Tifini apparently ran a tight ship, but Richter noticed that the longhouses and his own floor in the catacombs were quickly approaching spotless. The daily change in village Health ticked up again and actually moved into the positive range, increasing by +0.02 per day.

Having Professional Hunters meant they were bringing in larger game. The yield from their kills even increased, thanks to one of them purchasing the *Quartering* Talent. The skins the village had access to also jumped a rank in quality due to Hunter Radil buying the *Skinning* Talent. Even better, the Hunters had started helping with village defense by increasing their tracking capabilities. Richter planned to negotiate with

Hisako after the battle to secure a few more Cloaks of Concealment like the one he wore. The boost to hiding in any terrain would allow his Hunters to journey past that ten-mile radius of mist. Richter wanted to know more about what was happening outside of his domain.

The Farmer, Danot, chose three practical Talents: *Faster Crop Growth*, *Crop Resistance (pests)*, and *Crop Resistance (disease)*. The first increased the speed at which the village's crops would mature by 5% and the other two decreased the number of plants lost to either insects or blight. Neither of the last two had been a large issue yet, but Richter easily saw the wisdom in such preventative measures.

The Carpenter, Ulin, worked on building the longhouses under Lezli the gnome's direction. In addition to making the woodwork go faster, he had also invested in the Talents *Burnished Glow* and *Wooden Art*. The wood in the new buildings was now so polished that it literally shone with a soft light, and it gave the longhouses a warm and cheery glow at night. The villagers sleeping in the new longhouses reported having a better night's sleep, and soon there were squabbles about who would sleep in the "good" ones each night.

Wooden Art let Ulin carve animals and other figures into the wood of the buildings he worked on. It had another daily effect on Morale, increasing it by +0.03/day. Randolphus said such measures would also affect a City

Mechanic called Beauty that would be available once the village leveled up. He told Richter that Beauty would affect Morale, Loyalty, tourism and diplomatic relations with other settlements, among other important aspects of village life.

Burk didn't have much to do yet as village Locksmith, but he did start making locks and lockpicks for Richter as well as giving him a few lessons in the art of bypassing them. The chaos seed was able to learn Lock Picking, a skill that was extremely similar to Disarm Traps but with subtle differences. Burk also teamed up with Ulin to build secure chests.

The Courtesan, Inara, was fascinating to everyone who looked at her. So much so that there was no doubt there was magic at work. She had pale white skin and nearly jet-black hair. Her mysterious little smile had set more than one man stammering. From what Richter could see, she also had a "sploosh" effect on more than one village lady.

When Richter had asked if she felt like coming to "chill" in his room, she had just trailed her finger along his jawline and given him a quest. That was how making a tavern/pleasure house became a major priority.

Randolphus assured Richter that while a Courtesan could do some very interesting things in the bedroom, they were also ideal candidates for either Diplomat or Spy Jobs. It didn't escape Richter's notice that Inara was often seen with Burk, asking for more complicated locks to pick.

The Cordwainer, Wudhous, was a squirrely older man with liver spots who to Richter looked like someone who'd gotten beaten by a time stick... but there was no denying that the man made a comfortable shoe. His Talent *Soft Soles* had Richter feeling like he was walking on air. He'd come to expect a certain amount of discomfort when wearing his armor, especially in his aching feet. Thankfully, being leader of a village had some lovely perks, including the occasional foot massage that went to completion. Now though, with Wudhous's shoes, he was able to run for an hour in his armored boots before he started to cramp. That didn't stop the nightly happy endings, of course, but it did help his bunions!

Making a comfy shoe wasn't the end of Wudhous's contributions either. Richter had doubted how useful a Cordwainer would be, but the Profession actually had many practical Talents, increased comfort being the least of them. Cordwainers could make shoes that didn't leave a trail, even through crisp snow. The Talent *Slick Shoes* left an oily wake behind you that enemies could slip in. There were shoes that made you run faster, shoes that made you taller, and shoes that could walk on water. Cordwainers could make them all.

Wudhous said it was even possible to make shoes that gave the power of flight, though the man hadn't unlocked any Talents that allowed for that yet. The Talent that Richter got most excited about though was within the

old man's grasp. Richter had had to give the Cordwainer his rug in trade - the guy just wouldn't shut up about fetching rugs for some reason - but then the old Professional purchased *Spring Steps* as well as the prerequisite Talents that led to it.

Spring Steps let Wudhous create shoes that increased the base height of the wearer's vertical jump by a foot. Which was just what Richter needed to help augment his Cloud Running skill. At skill level ten, Cloud Running increased his base jump by 20%. With *Spring Steps* the bonus was even more pronounced.

Of all the skills he had gained, he had to admit that Cloud Running was easily the most fun. It greatly increased the efficiency of his running by letting him glide over the ground. He could run faster and use less stamina while he did it. The problem came when Richter tried to jump up more than once.

The skill let him "push off" the air to do a double jump like the white shinobi. The awesomeness of this fact was completely lost on Sion when Richter tried to explain it. The sprite had absolutely no problem laughing when his friend wiped out again and again though. The chaos seed discovered, once again, that there was a very large difference between having a skill and having the expertise to put it to good use. The entire village heard about how their lord tried to add a spinning flip to his jumps and ended up

suffering a rather serious head injury when his stamina bottomed out.

That did not dissuade Richter from practicing, though after that, he did try to do it away from prying eyes. Cloud Running let him jump, then jump again using the air like a spring board. The problem was, while his initial jump off the ground only used about five to ten stamina, the next air jump cost three times as much, the third jump cost three times that, and so on.

Even choking down stamina potions wouldn't help because the fifth jump cost four hundred to five hundred stamina. He quickly found that there was a ceiling to how high he could get. Richter's superhuman Strength of thirty-three let him have a vertical leap of over six feet if he really put his all into it and he wasn't wearing armor. Now, between the +20% jump boost that his ten skill levels in Cloud Running provided and his new shoes giving him another foot of air, he was clearing more than eight and a half feet from rest!

That meant, in ideal conditions, he could clear over forty feet by performing four jumps. Even attempting a fifth, would bottom out his stamina and he risked losing consciousness. Of course, maxing it out also meant bottoming out his stamina. After nearly blacking out at a height of three to four stories, he decided that "bottoming out" wasn't something he should do lightly. It didn't help that Alma wouldn't stop laughing her scaly

ass off for a full hour after she healed him.

Thankfully, going down was much easier than going up and did not have the same stamina penalty. Jumping sideways to maintain an elevation only increased the stamina required by 100%, and there was only a 50% cumulative penalty when doing a series of controlled falls. Even with the reduced price, it still drained stamina faster than the chaos seed would like. Still, Richter found he really enjoyed sliding down through the air like a skier on a slope.

He had the bright idea to combine his jumps with climbing, by Cloud Running near a cliff face. The heavy stamina penalty only applied when he was jumping off liquid or gaseous surfaces. The problem was, physics was as big of a bitch as she'd always been. Putting the lie to every Super Mario game ever, he could not jump away from the cliff and then, in midair, change his direction so that he ended up next to the rock face again. The idea was relatively possible because it let him jump from one spot on the rock to another in a straight line, but it relied on him quickly securing another handhold. Jumping away and jumping back presented the same problem, he had to grab a handhold before his glide time ran out. Even if it worked, holding onto a cliff face drained stamina by itself, and his regen rate wasn't so high that he could be sure that waiting would replenish his reserves. Richter could see a scenario like that going real wrong real quick, and the

consequence would be skydiving without a parachute.

Practicing with the new skill showed Richter the importance of investing stat points into Endurance. Cloud Running was an amazing skill, and according to Randolphus, a *rare* one. It was a stamina hog though. Even though he'd engaged in plenty of hand-to-hand combat since coming to The Land, Richter had mostly relied on clever tactics and magic to win his battles. He now saw the wisdom in bolstering his physical resilience as well. Hoping he wasn't making a mistake, Richter invested six of his Attribute Points into Endurance. As soon as he did, he felt slight changes in his body. His muscles seemed to tighten and his weight felt more evenly distributed. He also felt wide awake, like he'd just downed four shots of espresso!

The other twelve Attribute Points from his recent leveling he kept in reserve. He was sorely tempted to pour them all into Endurance as well though, thanks to his daily "educational opportunity" with Randolphus. Richter had thought Rogue training would involve catching flies with chopsticks or walking over rice paper without leaving a trace. Nope. It mostly involved a biomage standing by while the two men fought with short blades... without armor. Randolphus illustrated again and again the difference between having skill levels in Small Blades and actually having expertise in using them. He didn't teach Richter specific blade forms like Yoshi did, but he did have a million and one dirty tricks. It was the kind of

education you would get knife fighting in back alleys, not fighting on a battlefield.

Richter quickly learned the necessity of having a Life mage nearby when the Spy literally punctuated his lessons, and Richter's mistakes, with the pointy end of his blades. The chaos seed grew to hate the sound of Randy's cultured voice dispassionately shouting "Medic!" while his lord bled out on the ground.

They also did a great deal of stealth training, which involved Richter stalking through the forest trying to make his way back into the village undetected. Time and again he would feel a blade pierce his thigh or arm, and once his left butt cheek. He would try to counterattack, but even turning as quickly as possible, the most he ever saw was a wisp of black cloth as Randolphus stealthed again. Each time though, the Spy left an infuriating whisper in the wind, "Do better."

Richter made no progress in learning the secret rank perk of Stealth, but one thing that he did succeed at was a practice that Randolphus called "chi hardening." It was a technique that made it harder for others to learn information about him via *Analyze* or other means. Richter had to thicken his physical aura to do so. As he already had a great deal of experience manipulating his magical aura with *Imbue Arrow*, and more recently had practiced using his chi with *Stun Arrow*, he grasped the fundamentals fairly

quickly.

Randolphus told him it was not a perfect defense, but it would make it harder for him to be read. Keeping that information away from enemies just might save his life. Ideally, Richter would unconsciously keep his aura thickened all the time, even while sleeping. That would only come with practice, however, possibly years' worth according to the chamberlain.

Richter was in the middle of one such sparring session when a blazing red prompt appeared. He stepped back and the expression on his face made Randolphus start searching the area for enemies. The danger wasn't to either of them though.

DUNGEON MASTER RICHTER!

THE BARROW OF THE CHAOS SERPENT CALLS FOR AID!

CHAPTER 87 – Day 148 – Kuborn 38, 0 AoC



The intense red color of the prompt wasn't the only reason it stood out as abnormal. It also flashed dangerously in his vision. He had never gotten such a sense of menace from a notification window before. He didn't even have time to react before the prompt appeared again.

DUNGEON MASTER RICHTER!

THE BARROW OF THE CHAOS SERPENT CALLS FOR AID!

Richter focused on it and more information appeared.

The Barrow of the Chaos Serpent calls for your aid as its **Defender!**

Max party size is **Doubled** for the duration of this crisis. Exceeding max party size will cause all immunity to be removed.

Anyone entering to fight with you is given **Immunity** to Dungeon monsters and traps.

No **Loot** can be claimed or **Resources** gathered from the Dungeon or that person's immunity will be removed. Spoils of war can be gained from the Dungeon invaders without penalty. Breaking any of these regulations will cause that person to be Marked with the **Curse of the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent**.

Failure to destroy this specific threat will cause loss of your **Dungeon Mastery**. This could lead to the monsters breaking out of the Dungeon to wreak havoc, or even the absorption of the Dungeon mouth by the Labyrinth.

Protect your Dungeon!

He could lose his Dungeon? His people might be attacked by Labyrinth creatures? What was happening? Richter shook off his shock at the knowledge he'd just absorbed. He knew he had to make a split-second decision. He could cast *Dungeon Transport* and arrive at the Well of Offering in the next few seconds. The question was, what would happen then? Whatever the hell the danger was, he had to assume the worst. As badass a fighter as he now knew Randolphus was, the man had sounded cautious, and maybe even fearful, when he had discussed the monsters of the Labyrinth. If some of those had indeed invaded the Dungeon, Richter and

Randolphus probably couldn't handle it by themselves.

No, he couldn't just rush in. He had to arm up with the best the village had to offer and gather the strongest fighters and casters that he had. Richter started running towards the Forge of Heavens and Randolphus sprinted behind him. While he coasted on air using Cloud Running, he sent a message to his familiar.

Alma, go find Hisako, Yoshi and Sion. Tell them there is an emergency and ask them to meet me at the village gate immediately.

The dragonling had been flying above him, but veered off towards the Quickening, the usual haunt of the Hearth Mother. She took off like a bullet, her body already glowing yellow as she cast *Weak Haste*.

As soon as he got to the forge, he started snapping orders. "You!" Richter singled out one of the human smiths. "Drop what you're doing and run up to the Dragon's Cauldron. The guards might stop you from going up into the meadow, so give them the code phrase, 'Thank you, Bill Paxton,' and tell them to come with you. Give the same phrase to Tabia and tell her we need every health, mana and stamina potion she has. The guards will help you carry them down to the village gate." The man stared at him in surprise for a moment, but then raced off to do as he was told. Richter made a mental note to change the village passcode again and turned his attention to the

village Smith.

“What be the trouble, yer lordship?” Krom asked. He was holding his hammer in a way that said he was ready for anything. It wasn’t the enchanted ebony warhammer that had been handed down through the dwarf’s family for generations, but Richter had no doubt he could still do serious damage with the simple high steel tool in his hand.

“I’m not sure, but there’s trouble in the Dungeon.”

“Just let me don my chainmail,” Krom told him, moving quickly towards an armor rack.

“No, my friend,” Richter told him quickly. “This enemy might be beyond any of us, and I won’t risk the best smith in the village when there are others that can swing a weapon.” Krom opened his mouth to protest, his eyes flashing angrily at being sidelined, but Richter held up a hand, “I need you to make sure all of the village noncombatants make it up to the northern meadow. Do this for me. If I fail, you and the guards will have to keep our people safe. Do this for me.” The dwarf shut his mouth with an audible *clack*. His eyes were still angry, but he nodded and started shouting orders of his own.

Futen floated up in response to Richter’s mental summons. He gave the remnant an order as well, “Go to the training ground and find Terrod or

Caulder. Tell them we go to battle in five minutes. Tell them to meet me by the village gate and bring only the Professionals.”

“As you wish, my lord,” came the deadpan reply before the glowing orb floated off. While he normally moved at the speed of a walk, Futen could travel at the speed of a run if the situation called for it. Clearly, this time he felt the situation called for it.

“What can we do, Lord Richter?” another smith called out.

“Someone run to the Healer’s Hut and tell Sumiko that I need her and her best healers at the village gate in four minutes. Tell the other healers to go to the northern meadow and prepare for possible casualties. Everyone else, run through the village and tell everyone you meet the same thing.”

With those orders given, Richter walked over to the heavy elementum chest, only to be intercepted by Krom.

“Ay will do as ye command, yer lordship, but if a battle is a loomin’ then ye will have the best ay can offer. This were going to be one of three gifts before ye went to battle the lich, but the others na be ready yet. Ay had to buy a Talent, *Weld Magic*, ta make this, but ay think yew’ll agree, it be worth the price.” Krom took out a sword contained in a beautiful wooden sheath that had been lacquered black. Though he couldn’t see the blade, the hilt was ornate and familiar.

The chaos seed took the weapon and unsheathed it. When he did, the light in the forge dimmed and heat seemed stolen from the air. A moment later, the visual disturbance and sensation faded away and all was as it had been. Richter examined the beautiful instrument of death in his hand. As soon as he saw its power, he spent the necessary gems to soul bind it to him and him alone.

You
have
found:
**Black
Ice**

This darkstone blade was forged by Bowdin of the Mist Village and enchanted by the village Master, Richter. The hilt was recovered from a pile of the dead. Created from the dimensional bones of a Greater Shadow Demon, this hilt and the blade that was once attached were wielded by the Dark Paladin Tqlor. A fragment of the demon's soul is still bound to this item. Using this hilt will shroud the wielder in shadows, greatly increasing their base Concealment stat. Whosoever holds the weapon also benefits from some of the demon's powers. The more lives this weapon claims, the greater the powers it can unlock. The culmination of these events has produced a **Named Weapon**. You hold *Black Ice*.

Level: 1

Attack: 29-36

Durability: 317/317

Item Class: Rare

Quality: Superb

Weight: 6.9 kg

Traits:

+10% Damage vs Spell Barriers

+9-10 Earth damage*

7-8% chance to *Disarm*

3% chance to *Shatter*

+4-5 Water Damage**

4% Chance to *Freeze*

Wounds inflicted with darkstone will fester and interfere with

mana regeneration

Hilt Bonus: Your weapon hungers. Feed it to increase its powers.

+1 Dark Damage per 5 skill ranks in Dark magic ***

Charges: 468/468

* +200% vs Air, +300% vs Crystalline

** +100% vs Fire

***Independent of Charge

In the hidden caverns of the northern meadow, after Richter had slain the dark aberration, he had found a room full of bones and items left over from centuries of the monster's victims. It had almost all been trash, but Krom had saved a few pieces, this random hilt included. Krom had affixed the hilt that Richter had found to the darkstone blade Bowdin had forged. Richter had had no idea it would actually be valuable. He didn't really understand why the blade had gone from being *scarce* to *rare*, but then he saw the "hilt bonus." It was a gods-damned scalable item!

Richter didn't really know the significance of having a "Named Weapon." Krom told him he couldn't answer that. Each Named Weapon was unique and only fighting with it would reveal its nature. Even without that info, the blade's enchantments, coupled with the Dark damage from the hilt, were huge. It was also a scalable weapon, so even without its Named status, it would get stronger the more he used it! Krom told him that scalable weapons could grow in many ways. They could level with their user, absorb

the energy of slain creatures, or require new components to be added, among many other methods. Black Ice fell into the second category.

“Krom. I-” Richter was at a loss for words. The Smith had sacrificed precious Talent Points to make this weapon. The village was truly lucky to have such a dedicated man.

“Yar. Do na make it weird,” Krom told him gruffly. “Just go kill things.” The dwarf turned away, muttering under his breath. “Give a man a blade, and he turns into a wee lass.”

Richter smiled after the gruff dwarf. Another smith brought him a shoulder harness for the sword. Every smith in the village knew that Richter didn’t like wearing a sword belt. The story of him trying to walk with one, only to fall three times in quick succession, was still chuckled about.

That done, he raced down to the village gate. A few minutes later, everyone was assembled and Richter filled them in on the prompts that he’d received. He told Hisako and Yoshi that they, of course, did not have to come. It was his village and his Dungeon that was being threatened, after all. The Hearth Mother just waved his words away and asked what the plan was.

Richter looked to Randolphus as the man had the most experience of any of them by far. The Spy had nothing to add though, “The Hall of Elemental Hunters has not had a Master for centuries. I have never been

called to defend a Dungeon before. Labyrinth monsters would occasionally enter and cause a bit of havoc, but the Dungeon in Law is so large that its own monsters would overwhelm any interloper if given enough time. Adventurers mostly avoided those sections of the Dungeon until the Labyrinth creatures were slain. To be perfectly honest, running from Labyrinth monsters has always seemed the best course of action.”

Great, Richter thought. The badass Spy’s only advice was to run away from the very monsters that they were about to run towards. He addressed the group gathered before him, “I have no idea what we’re about to face. Believe my next words, everyone. Even though the rest of you are my villagers, none of you has to come with me. I only want volunte-” Terrod, Caulder, Sion and every single other person took a deliberate step forward. Richter’s heart swelled with pride. With a firm nod, he said, “Then let’s do this.”

Dungeon Transport only had an effective distance of five yards from himself, but that was enough for the group he was taking into the barrow. With his party size doubled, he could take ten with him, not counting his Companions. It meant he could bring his whole varsity squad. His defenders included the Warriors Cath, Ulinde, Ygritte, and Wisteria. Except for Ulinde they were all melee fighters, and each was wearing the best weapons and armor the village could provide.

His three village Mages were also present: Sumiko, Zarr and Quasea. Hisako, Yoshi and Caulder rounded out the ten-count. With Richter and his Companions, that brought the total up to fourteen. The smith he had sent to the Dragon's Cauldron arrived with the potions and Richter made sure they were handed out. The magi also cast buffs on the party, increasing their health, attack, defense and speed. The spells weren't cheap, and the mages downed two blue mana potions each right afterward. He also handed out Potions of Clarity from his Bag of Holding to every party member. Everyone drank the sparkling clear fluid, each hoping they would live long enough to enjoy the +25% experience boost. With the preparations done, Richter cast his spell.

Tendrils of mist rose from the ground, encircling them all in a grey-white bubble. Nine seconds later, they appeared in the Entrance Chamber. Richter quickly looked around, but saw no immediate threat. The throbbing red warning signs that kept popping up in his vision proved the danger had not passed. The shimmering energy field that led into the rest of the Dungeon was still there though, which Richter hoped was a good sign.

The chaos seed drew Black Ice and strode through the portal, his party close behind. Devastation met his gaze. Most of the red columns were in ruins. Richter hadn't even been sure that they could be broken, but only a few still remained whole, the rest shattered or snapped in half. The bodies of

koran tuskers and jenit prowlers lay strewn about the cavern. In many cases there were just pieces left of the Dungeon monsters.

Spear-like projectiles nailed one prowler to the broken remains of a stone column. Whatever had thrown the weapon had done so hard enough to embed the javelin two feet into the enchanted stone. Immediately in front of Richter lay the two ragged halves of a large tusker that had been torn apart. Richter had no idea how a creature that had to weigh half a ton could have been torn in half. Then he heard the roar.

It was a deafening, earthshaking bellow of rage. More squeals and howls echoed from the same location, at the heart of the chamber. Even though many of the columns had been damaged, enough remained whole that Richter could not see the source of the noise. The rest of his party appeared out of the portal behind him, and Alma launched herself from his shoulders. She gained altitude immediately and flew directly towards the center of the cavern. Seconds later, Richter saw what they would be fighting. His eyes widened in shock and two dueling feelings swelled in his chest: fear... and excitement.

Richter turned and looked at his party, “Ummmm. It’s a rancor.”

That probably wasn’t the creature’s real name, but he’d be damned if that wasn’t what it looked like. Richter had to fight an irrational desire to

look up, just to be absolutely sure that Jabba wasn't looking down on him through a ceiling grate.

The Labyrinth monster was about thirty feet high with gravy-brown skin. Some of it was ruffled in places like a bulldog. It hunched over like an old person, but there was nothing frail about it. The thing's muscles were so large that it almost looked like there were tumors in its arms. Arms that were so long they could drag along the ground. They ended in gigantic, three-fingered hands tipped with four-foot talons. Its head was the size of a pickup truck and its face was pinched like it had been sucking on a sour ball. With its massive fangs though, Richter was sure its primary food source was warm and bloody.

Prowlers and tuskers were attacking it, but the creature wasn't alone. Six other monsters that Richter had never seen before were running around the rancor's feet, fighting the Dungeon monsters as well. They looked like a cross between a hyena and a dog. Their hairless skin was matte grey and massive quills traced down their backs like mohawks. They had sharp talons on each paw and their two front feet each had a long dagger-like spur that they were using to eviscerate the attacking Dungeon beasts.

Dozens of beasts were attacking the Labyrinth monsters, but dozens more already lay dead. The Labyrinth monsters were unfazed, just attacking with abandon. Richter saw the largest monster almost casually pick up a

fully grown adult tusker. Its long talons pierced the side of the pig beast, letting dark red blood trace down its arm. With no hurry at all, it put the squealing creature into its mouth. One strong bite was all it took to rip away the tusker's leg and most of its side. Blood fell in a torrent, splashing the ground beneath. The red fluid was being sucked up like it was water in a desert. The Dungeon was using that blood to restore some of its power, instinctually trying to regain enough energy to spawn even one more beast.

It was fighting a losing battle.

Even though Richter had been warned about how dangerous the Labyrinth's monsters would be, he was still taken aback by the intense savagery of the battle. Quickly pulling out his Traveler's Map, he showed everyone the images Alma was sending him.

"Have you ever seen these things before?" he asked Randolphus.

"No. That means little though, my lord. The Labyrinth has an endless supply of horrors."

Hisako had nothing to add either.

"Okay, then," Richter said, thinking quickly. His heart was pounding in his chest in anticipation of battling some of The Land's worst monsters. "We could wait. Try to separate the monsters and take them down one at a time. As long as I read the prompt right, the Dungeon monsters are on our

side for now. Or at the very least, I don't think they'll attack us. If that's the case, then waiting is a mistake. We need to attack while we still have allies. I say we get in there now. Try to kill the little ones, then take out the big ugly one."

"You do realize those 'little ones' are still bigger than us, right?" Sion asked, not liking what he'd seen on the map.

"Got any better ideas?" Richter asked. The ensuing silence was all the answer he needed. "That's that, then. Warriors, take out the smaller ones, one at a time. Terrod and Caulder, protect the casters. Sumiko, reserve your mana for healing. Everyone else," he shook his head a bit helplessly, "I'm sure you know what to do. Sion, ol' buddy, let's make this opening salvo count."

The chaos seed sheathed his sword. Then he retrieved his bow from his Bag of Holding. Taking a quick breath, he placed a *Multishot Arrow of Shattering* on his bowstring. The other two archers did the same.

"Let's sneak closer, using the remaining pillars for cover. Once we're within range, I'll sneak a peek and use *Analyze*. If there's any relevant information, I'll let all of you know; otherwise, we imbue and shoot. Ulinde, fire at the same time we do." Everyone nodded and the group moved forward, as silently as possible.

Snarls, bestial squeals of pain and a cackling laugh echoed through the cavern. Through Alma's eyes, Richter could see that the last sound was coming from the six hyena-dogs. She was perched, unmoving, against the stalactite half of a broken red column. Her constant visual feed let him keep track of the battle. The Dungeon monsters were obviously outclassed but, at least for now, they were making up for that in numbers. The hyenas were bleeding from multiple wounds and one was actually buried under a pile of eight jenit prowlers. The Dungeon's beast defenders were getting the worst of it by far, but at least they were making the invaders feel the pain. Richter silently hoped it would be enough. He did not want to lose his Dungeon!

The beasts, though completely ineffectual against the larger monster, did keep all seven Labyrinth creatures occupied, so the party was able to make their way to the edge of the battle without being detected. Heaving one last sigh, Richter adopted *Stealth*. Then, poking his head around a pillar, he saw the monsters with his own eyes. Somehow, it was always worse than when Alma sent him mental images. He used *Analyze* on the smaller ones first.

Name: Chupacabra

Disposition: Amused

Chupacabras are pack monsters that are known for their speed and ferocity. They are said to feed on pain as much as blood and flesh. The spines on their back and claws on their feet can rend even plate mail. As a Labyrinthine creature, they have grown to massive size and power.

*Special Attack: **Piercing Quill** – Can fire the quills on their backs at high speed at distant enemies.*

Level: 42

Health: 1879/2076

Mana: 87

Stamina: 3513/4180

Strength: 65

Agility: 88

Dexterity: 79

Constitution: 210

Endurance: 418

Intelligence: 8

Wisdom: 5

The other four had roughly the same stats, give or take a level. The insane amount of health these things possessed was mind-boggling! It wasn't only their health and stamina that made them dangerous. The high Agility and Dexterity they each had explained why they were able to dart around so quickly. More than one jenit prowler bit only air while attacking. The chupacabras' counterattacks never failed to rend flesh.

Richter's jaw firmed. He'd heard of chupacabras in stories from time to time back on Earth, but all he remembered was that their name was supposed to mean "goat licker" or something like that. The fangs on these things were terrifying though, so he was pretty sure he'd gotten something wrong in translation.

As unhappy as he was with the stats of the smaller monsters, his heart dropped when he examined the larger one.

Name: Tovuut Mauler
???

Disposition: Hatred

Level: ???		
Health: 5772	Mana: 15	Stamina: 3554/3608
Strength: ???		
Agility: ???		
Dexterity: ???		
Constitution: ???		
Endurance: ???		
Intelligence: ???		
Wisdom: ???		
Charisma: ???		
Luck: ???		

The thing had such a high level that his *Analyze* skill only let him see its name, disposition and the *insane* amount of health and stamina it had! This was the kind of creature that would have been a raid boss when he'd thought The Land was just a game. Entire guilds, hundreds of high level players, would have burned through millions of gold crowns' worth of potions, spell scrolls and equipment to take something like this down. This wasn't a game though, and if any of his comrades died, the Life masters might not be able to bring them back. If Sumiko and Hisako died... the consequences of that could mean the death of everyone in his village.

Sweating a bit, Richter shared the info he'd been able to glean. Everyone's faces grew grim at hearing how strong the monsters were, but they all just held their weapons tighter. Seeing their courage made it easier for Richter to deal with his own fears. He focused on the matter at hand and

told his best friend to target the closest chupacabra. It was the one that had been buried in the dogpile and had the lowest health. It had already killed half of the prowlers that were attacking it, but for now it was still occupied and distracted. Sion nodded back and Ulinde said he would do what he could. The two Companions both downed a mana potion and began to imbue.

A golden light surrounded Richter's arrow. Sion waited a three-count before doing the same. The sprite's superior skill in *Imbue Arrow* let him invest mana faster than his friend. Because of that, they had practiced their attacks and found that a three-second delay in Sion's imbue would let them finish draining both of their mana pools at the same time so they could fire simultaneously. Black flashes appeared around the chaos seed's arrow while a blue aura surrounded Sion's. They poured more mana into their shots, ignoring the pain that came from being swiftly drained of magic. Yellow lightning began to crackle around Richter's arrow, and blue-white lightning danced across the sprite's.

One hundred, two hundred, three hundred, Richter counted silently as he prepared his attack. It wasn't just a mantra, it was a communication with Alma that let her know how much mana he had invested in his attack. When he reached five hundred, she silently launched herself towards a second chupacabra. Her body glowed yellow a moment before a bolt of lightning

shot from her snout directly into the eyes of her foe. It did not cause much damage, but it did elicit a howl of anger and pain. The monster immediately dashed towards the direction of the attack, bringing it next to Richter's target. Bringing it within the AoE of his imbued attack.

Flawless, he thought as he released his shot. A black-and-gold torpedo swam through the air with a brilliant blue brother beside it. Ulinde's own arrow flew through the air as well, invested with his *Drill Shot* subskill. After crossing half the distance, all three arrows were copied into three more versions of themselves. The overlapping imbued lights were almost beautiful for the split second they lasted before contact and detonation. The *BOOM* drowned out even the roar of the tovuut mauler. Richter let the combat information wash over him.

BEGIN COMBAT LOG

Chupacabra suffers from *Mind Fog*.

Chupacabra resists *Stun*.

Chupacabra suffers from *Psi Crystallization*.

Richter strikes *Chupacabra* with *Enhanced Imbue Arrow* for 396 points of varied damage with primary arrow: [(+15 Recurve Bow of the Wood Sprite

+ 8 Moonstone Arrow + 34% for level 17 Archery + 76% for 38 points of Dexterity) + (601 Mana/5 + 85% for level 17 Imbue Arrow + 42% familiar level)/4 Arrows – 14 Armor] x 3 Critical Hit for Pierced Lung.

6-foot radius AoE Damage (not including modifiers): **68**

Richter strikes **Chupacabra** with Enhanced Imbue Arrow for **204** points of varied damage with copied arrows (48 Piercing Damage + 272/4 Magical Force Damage – 14 Armor): ... x **2 arrows**

Total Damage: **600**

END COMBAT LOG

One of the copies of Richter's arrow had struck a pillar, exploding harmlessly. Despite that loss, the damage of his opening attack was massive! Using Imbue Arrow with a *Multishot* enchantment decreased the individual magic force damage of each hit, but the cumulative effect of overlapping fields of force more than made up the difference. Ragged and bloody wounds appeared in the chupacabra's body, its blood feeding the Dungeon once more. The area of effect from the shot spilled over onto the other monster and the three beasts that had still been attacking Richter's target.

Less than a split second later, all five of Sion's multishot arrows struck at the same time as Ulinde's. Two more deadly salvos comprised of ten more arrows wreaked havoc on the chupacabra's body. The attack had emptied the mana pools of both Companions, but it was worth it. Coupled with Ulinde's *Drill Shot*, nothing could survive that attack.

Except, the monster did.

One of its legs was mangled and great bleeding rents pockmarked its body, but the damn thing was still alive! It screamed in pain even as the quills on its back began to quiver.

"Cover!" Richter shouted, ducking behind a red stone pillar.

Twenty spikes flew through the air like spears, shot from the backs of the two chupacabras. The pillar Richter was hiding behind shuddered when several quills hammered the other side. The party couldn't see it, but two of the projectiles had sunk deep into the stone column. A horrible howling echoed through the cavern, a call to battle and a promise of retribution from all six of the quilled monsters. The mauler roared as well, stuffing more beasts into its ever-hungry mouth.

"The beast is mine! You kill the dogs!" Hisako called out with gleeful savagery. The Hearth Mother was not daunted in the slightest by the fact that the opening attack hadn't claimed a life. Instead, she was flush with

the thrill of battle. Even though Richter had seen the sprite in battle several times, it still took him aback when he saw the other side of his ally's nature come out. Sprites might delight in the tranquility of nature, but they happily embraced the violent and merciless side of it as well.

As Hisako began to cast, Richter risked another glance around the corner. To his delight, the second monster that had been in his AoE had been afflicted with *Mind Fog*, a secondary effect of his imbued arrow attack. It served the same role as *Confusion*, leading the creature to act in unpredictable ways. After it had fired its quills at him, it had fired a second volley at the mauler. The giant monster had suffered damage for the first time, which was a relief to the chaos seed. For all he knew, it could have been invulnerable.

The injured chupacabra was being targeted by another wave of Dungeon beasts now. With the mauler distracted by its dog's treachery, the animal defenders were able to focus on the smaller Labyrinth creatures. That still left three rather large problems, however, namely the other chupacabras that were speeding towards Richter's party!

The chaos seed dropped his bow. Reaching back, he drew his elementum short sword and Named Weapon simultaneously. The lights dimmed momentarily and the air cooled as Black Ice was released. Named or not, he wasn't sure what even his newly enchanted blade could do against the monster that was only seconds away from attacking him.

Thankfully, he wasn't alone.

While the three archers had fired their volley, Quasea had been chanting a long spell. The voluptuous gnome finished the incantation. A pool of inky blackness flowed from her hands and into the path of one chupacabra. It tried to jump over it, but the darkness just moved to where it would land. When it did, the creature partially sank into the Dark magic.

The gnome noctimancer had cast *Sucking Tar*. The *enhanced* rank spell was one of the strongest that she knew and had cost five hundred and twenty-eight MPs. Even though the cost was steep, both in mana and the headache she was now having to endure, the fourth-tier spell was powerful. It would consume any creature that was caught in its clutches, slowly swallowing them in a black morass from which they'd never escape. It should have removed one of the party's enemies from the board. The only problem with Quasea's plan was that she had never fought a Labyrinthine monster before.

The chupacabra's feet were sucked down until its knees were covered in the black magic, but it didn't keep sinking. With massive strength and pure malevolence, it fought against the spell. Its muscles were not the only thing that protected it. Nothing survived long in the Labyrinth without developing resistances. As strong as Quasea's spell was, it was still powered by a Basic Element, one of the most common magics in The Land. With a

43% resistance to Dark magic, the noctimancer could not hope to overcome such a fiend. Even as it fought to get free, it stared death at the gnome and fired five quills at her, each moving at the speed of an arrow. Death raced towards her, and her eyes widened in fear.

Thankfully, she wasn't alone.

Caulder was always free with a laugh, but in battle, he was all business. He was the type of man you could rely upon. When Richter had charged him with defending the party's casters, he had decided that all the party's mages would live through the battle or he would die trying to make it happen. While Quasea cast her spell, the sergeant had stood ready with his massive wardoor shield. The heavy slab of metal was more bank vault than shield, which was probably the only reason it held.

Before the quills even left the monster's back, Caulder had braced himself in front of the gnome mage to take the five blows. They hit with the force of a heavy crossbow bolt fired from point blank range. A great *gonging* reverberated through the chamber and massive dents appeared in the wardoor. The sergeant couldn't keep a wail of pain from escaping as his arm broke in two places. He still stood though, ready to accept the charge of a monster that was more than twice his own level. Caulder knew he couldn't defeat it or even defend himself from its attacks for long, but by the banished gods he would stand!

Thankfully, he wasn't alone.

Sumiko began casting healing magic on Caulder as soon as he cried out, and then it was Zarr's turn to make his presence known. The caster finished a spell, his voice sounding like rocks grinding together. Green light flared on both of his hands before winking out. A moment later, the ground behind the ensnared chupacabra broke apart and a granite golem began to pull itself out of the ground. The geomancer hadn't held back either; he'd cast the only *potent* level spell that he knew. Sweat had beaded on the caster's brow and the words of Power had felt like sand and honey in his mouth as he had performed the fifth-tier magic, but he was not about to be outdone by a gnome, no matter how good her tits looked in a black robe!

The level thirty-three summoned creature had a much lower level than the chupacabra, but it made up for that in size, strength and weight. Standing eleven feet tall, it weighed more than four tons and its hands could crush stone. Zarr called out a hoarse command, "Bury it!" before he collapsed to one knee from the strain of such a powerful casting.

The golem took one step forward, moving fluidly despite its mineral-heavy body. Then it as much fell on as attacked the chupacabra struggling to escape Quasea's spell. The gnome was pouring more mana into the *active* spell, trying to keep the monster ensnared, but it was still almost free. One foot was already clear of the tarlike spell substance when the golem attacked.

The Labyrinth monster screamed in anger that soon turned to panic. It had great Strength and a high resistance to magic, but physics was always a bitch. Thousands of pounds of semi-sentient rock pushed down from above while Quasea's spell pulled from below. The chupacabra yowled, spit and tried to fire the quills from its back, but with the golem hugging it close, the special attack didn't have the room to manifest. The gnome Mage grew lightheaded as her mana started to bottom out. As her vision grew clouded, Zarr called out, "Just hold on, Quaz!" The gnome nodded to her geomancer friend and reasserted her will.

A few seconds later, the screaming monster disappeared completely into the black morass of Dark magic. The golem was still bearhugging it and sank through the miasma as well.

"Now!" Zarr shouted.

Quasea let go of the spell and the blackness disappeared. All that was left behind was churned earth. Both monster and summoned creature were gone forever. Struggling to stay conscious, the gnome downed a mana potion while she edged away from the battle. The strain of maintaining such powerful magic, against a high-level monster no less, had taken a toll. It was the mental equivalent of pulling a door closed while someone pulled on the other side for several minutes in a row. Instead of burning arms though, her mind and aura were exhausted. The migraine she was suffering meant she

needed at least thirty seconds before she could cast again. If the chupacabras reached her, she would die horribly, just another once-powerful mage turned helpless without mana.

Thankfully, she wasn't alone.

While all of this was happening, the Warriors of the Mist Village showed off their new powers. The three melee fighters intercepted a chupacabra. Two held swords and shields, while the third carried a heavy spear. Working together, they were able to hold the monster at bay and began trading blows with it. The creature was much stronger than any of them individually, but their enchanted weapons and armor went a long way to even the odds.

The chupacabra attacking the mauler had been thrown across the cavern. Getting physical distance between itself and the larger monster, its *Mind Fog* debuff no longer drove it to attack its ally. It just bit and clawed whatever was closest. That happened to be some of the few remaining Dungeon beasts. While those creatures futilely defended themselves and died, Yoshi stayed in front of the Hearth Mother, both ice rapiers at the ready. During the whole battle, she had been casting a long and powerful spell. The light radiating off her grew in brilliance, drawing the attention of the Labyrinth boss. It roared in defiance and began rushing towards her. The mauler was too late. With a final shouted word of Power, her spell was

completed!

White light shot from her hands and turned into ribbons of force. These large streaks wrapped around the monster in an attempt to mummify it. Not only was the creature restrained, but the magic bandages burned its skin. It screamed in anger while it fought against the Hearth Mother's attack. The air thrummed with the residual energy released by her spell. Sadly, it was not enough.

The mauler's high resistance was coupled with an ability that Richter had not been able to see when he analyzed it. The Labyrinth boss possessed physical regenerative properties. Even as its skin burned, it repaired itself. Hisako's spell could have bound a mountain troll and killed it given time, but the mauler was a horror of the Labyrinth. With a massive pull of its arm, one of the ribbons of white light snapped. Hisako grunted in pain. It was only thanks to her disciplined mind that she did not lose consciousness in response to the spell feedback.

She'd been confident that the *superior* sixth-tier spell would be enough to contain the mauler, but she had underestimated it. Just like the chupacabras, the creature had broad magic resistances. It was more susceptible to Light magic than any other basic element, but it was still able to ignore 38% of the spell's strength. If she'd known how truly powerful the mauler was, she wouldn't have used an *active* spell that was still connected to

her.

Hisako was still not intimidated by the towering monster. The Hearth Mother was the Master of three magics. Using the hidden *apprentice* rank bonus of Earth magic, she switched the spell from *active* to *static*. Before she did, she poured five hundred more mana points into the spell, strengthening it before tying it off. The bands of white light grew thicker and brighter, and the Labyrinth monster bellowed anew as it was bound tightly again.

A trickle of blood ran from Hisako's nose, but she paid it no heed. Instead, she remained focused on the battle. "Yoshi! Bring it down!"

The sword adept didn't hesitate. His loyalty and trust in Hisako was absolute. He rushed forward with Talent-enhanced speed and both blades held at the ready. He showed no fear as he attacked a creature that was ten times his height. Just before he entered striking distance, Hisako cast another spell of Light. She had already used nearly a thousand MPs, but the mana she could call upon was better described as a sea than a pool.

This time her target wasn't the mauler, it was her blade adept. Copies of Yoshi appeared in the cavern. First five, then twenty-five, then fifty. The magic she performed, *Reflected Essence*, was not just a stronger version of Richter's *Mirror Image* spell. Each copy of Yoshi had zero defense and only one health but could cause damage that was one tenth of the max damage the

adept himself could inflict. They each moved independently and began attacking the mauler, literally whittling away its health while it hurled itself against the cage of Hisako's spell.

The battle raged on.

Terrod stood shoulder to shoulder with his liege, facing a chupacabra. The captain held a moonstone mace and Richter held his two blades of black and green. The monster snapped and gnashed at both of them, but even it could not ignore the strength of their enchanted weapons. Richter scored a blow on its side and the *Shatter* enchantment triggered. The chupacabra's thick hide collapsed inward, revealing the tender meat beneath. Even as the monster howled, Richter followed up with a thrust attack of his elementum short sword. A quick twist worsened the wound and he jumped back, narrowly avoiding the monster's counterattack. Terrod capitalized on its distraction to bring his mace down on its front leg with crushing force.

The battle raged on.

Sion continued to fire arrows at the chupacabras. He had originally targeted the mauler, but he might as well have been blowing it kisses for all the damage he'd caused. The meidon sprite had downed another mana potion and was imbuing another arrow to the max. Ulinde stood next to him firing *Drill Shot* arrows as quickly as he could, each spinning arrow bypassing

some of the monsters' defenses.

Randolphus had phased into Stealth as soon as the battle began, but flashes of his enchanted knives could be seen from time to time. He would appear as he threw his magic weapons, and as soon they left his hand he would disappear again. Zarr and Quasea had both downed mana potions and were waiting for their pools to refill. Sumiko had turned her attention to the village Warriors, healing as needed. She cast an AoE buff, sending a golden light into the air. Every party member touched by the rays of the spell had their dodge increased by +18%. The sergeant stood between the monsters and the Mages, ready to lay down his life if needed.

Alma had fired a lightning bolt at one of the chupacabras, but its Air resistance had negated the *Stun* effect and reduced the damage to almost nothing. After that, she focused on playing support for her master's party and the Dungeon beasts. Her summoned Life fox was already shooting beams of healing energy at a koran tusker.

Sion's imbuelement maxed out as his mana pool depleted. A second before he fired, the mauler raked its giant claws against the ribbons of light that held it in place. Three of the magical bonds snapped in two. One arm was now completely free, which let it counterattack against Yoshi and his copies. In one sweep of its giant arm, it destroyed twelve of the false images at once. Hisako's heart paused until she saw the others still moving, which

meant the real Yoshi was still alive. Against the mauler's attack, even the sword adept's armor and skills might not save him from sudden death.

"Yoshi! Move!" Sion shouted. The half-sprite and his clones jumped away from the mauler and Richter's Companion unleashed hell. Prior to the battle, the chaos seed had handed this arrow to Sion, affectionately dubbing it 'the showstopper.'

An arrow tipped with a cobalt head shot through the air. Its *Exquisite* quality, coupled with Krom's new Talent *Enchanted Smithing*, had given Richter fifty-nine enchantment slots to play with, and oh, how he'd played! The missile was enchanted with level two, rank five *Sonic Damage* and level one, rank three *Dark Attack*. That meant Sion had just fired +22 points of enchanted damage, +12 points of arrow damage, +19 points of bow damage and an insane +213 points of imbued force damage. Richter had told him that when you just absolutely, positively *had* to kill the biggest motherfucker in the room... you should accept no substitutes!

The arrow split the air and homed in on the mauler's face. It struck with a resounding *BOOM* that set every living creatures' ears ringing. The mauler screamed in pain for the first time. Richter's entire party held their breath, praying that the monster would fall or had at least been crited. Instead, the mauler activated a second hidden ability. Even as the massive crater in its face rained down blood and gore, a red aura surrounded the

creature as it triggered *Rage!*

The hearts of every one of the Dungeon's defenders dropped as the creature tore through the last of its magical bonds. It would be free in seconds!

"This enemy may be beyond us, Lord Richter!" Hisako called. "I suggest we withdraw!" She cast another spell, piercing a limping chupacabra with a beam of light that cut straight through the monster. It hacked up blood and howled, but it still refused to fall. The maunder didn't even notice the attack on its dog as it shredded more of its bonds. One of the chupacabras was near death, but it had slain all of the Dungeon beasts attacking it and was starting to crawl on two legs towards the party. The quills on its back were still capable of claiming all of their lives.

The one facing off against the village Warriors had been destroyed when the *Freeze* enchantment on the heavy spear had triggered. The monster's front paw had frozen solid and another Warrior had used *Power Strike*. The blow had shattered the limb, dropping its health precipitously and causing a serious drop in its mobility. The Warriors had been able to kill it after that, but not without casualties. Wisteria had been punctured through the thigh with a four-foot quill and Cath had been knocked unconscious. Blood flowed freely from a head wound that showed his skull underneath. Both had been dragged to safety by Ygritte and had been healed by Sumiko,

but not completely. Wisteria's femur had been shattered and would require several rounds of healing to fully repair, and even Life magic could not completely heal all head wounds immediately. Both injured Warriors were out of commission.

Richter and Terrod had managed to stab their enemy in the throat, but not before it had sunk its teeth deep into the captain's shoulder. It had flung its head back and forth, shaking the man like a rag doll before throwing him against a shattered pillar. The monster had collapsed after that, Richter's elementum short sword buried in its throat while it gurgled its last.

Sumiko had been able to staunch Terrod's bleeding, although his face was now dangerously pale from blood loss. But she could not repair the nerve or bone damage in a combat setting without a massive expenditure of mana, and when her magic might save the life of another fighter at any moment, she couldn't risk her MPs dropping too low. As a result, Terrod's savaged arm hung lame and limp.

Richter looked around, his heart beating wildly. There were no more beasts to help them. Three of the chupacabras had been killed: one by Quasea's magic, a second by the Warriors, and the third by his own hand, but it still left three of the creatures stalking them. The only reason they hadn't used their ranged attack was that every member of the party was huddled behind a broken pillar. If they remained spread out like that though, they

would become easy pickings for the high-level monsters. If they grouped together to fight, one chupacabra could pick them off with its deadly quills while the other two rent them with sharp fangs and eviscerating claws.

The three snarling creatures were also the lesser threat by far. The damage Sion had wreaked upon the mauler had been severe, but it was already healing and had thousands of health left besides. Sion stood with another arrow knocked, ready to attack if his friend ordered it. The rest of the party looked to him as well, willing to follow his orders, even unto death... All except for Yoshi, who was definitely looking at him like he was a stupid gyoti who was completely to blame for everything that was happening.

Richter gritted his teeth both in irritation and frustration. Hisako was right. He couldn't just sacrifice these people. Even if it meant losing his Dungeon. If the chupacabras had all been killed then maybe they could chip away at the mauler's health, but there was no way his party could oppose them all. So far, they had only managed to kill two monsters, and it had cost them every single Dungeon beast. A third of his party's fighters were out of commission. Tasting ashes in his mouth, he prepared to order the retreat.

Then, out of nowhere, Randolphus appeared. His whip flew out and encircled the body of one of the wounded chupacabras. Putting the weight-decreasing properties of the whip to deadly use, the Spy pulled back hard and spun. The monster's body flew through the air with an indignant squawk.

As the Spy spun, the centrifugal force increased until the chupacabra's protests ended in a *crunch* as it was slammed face-first into a column. Yoshi and the few remaining clones rushed forward to stab it over and over, taking away the last points of its life.

The other two turned towards the Spy, ready to fire, but then the Harbinger finally made its presence known. Richter's old pet shot out from the column it had been hiding against, mouth open wide and fangs dripping with chaotic poison. Its high steel scales had shifted in color to perfectly match the blood red stone of the column, showing that it still deserved its moniker, The Unseen Killer. Before the Labyrinth monster could react, the Harbinger had latched onto the chupacabra's neck and injected its poison. The fluid attack could manifest in any number of ways in accordance with its chaotic nature, but this time it transformed into a solidifying agent, turning the monster's own blood to stone. Its scream was short-lived and it died, frozen in place, its mouth open for all time.

The last chupacabra lashed out, its claw cutting deep into the chaotic reptile's side. Red blood with a grey tinge gushed from the wound, but the Harbinger was not easily undone. The adder released its bite and hissed at the monster attacking it. It slithered around to the quilled monster's right, both creatures preparing for a fight to the death. Richter's party stared at the showdown in surprise, all of them slightly shocked at seeing a twenty-foot-

long serpent seemingly appear out of nowhere and save them.

Randolphus, with his hundred years of combat experience and great familiarity with hidden attacks, shook off his surprise first. “What are you doing?” he shouted to the rest of the party incredulously. “Fight!” So saying, he snapped his whip at the last chupacabra, scoring against its face.

The monster drew back instinctively with a snarl, which was all the high steel adder needed. The snake shot forward quicker than the eye could follow and bit its enemy on the foreleg. The chupacabra howled as acidic poison shot into its body, but only for the four seconds it took for the adder to wrap its body once around the Labyrinth monster’s chest and start to squeeze. The dangerous quills on its back were pushed flat and the adder continued to loop its body around its foe, its coils tightening with each moment. Alma landed on the monster’s head with a savage cry and latched on with *Brain Drain*. For a moment, the dragonling and the chaotic reptile locked eyes, enjoying a sense of camaraderie once again.

As Richter’s two reptiles engaged the last chupacabra, the rest of the war party had sprung into action. Before the *crack* of Randolphus’s whip had faded from the air, Richter responded to the man’s charge that they continue the battle. A manic smile had bloomed on the chaos seed’s face and with an unholy glee he shouted, “Well, you heard him. FIGHT!”

Sion began firing enchanted arrows at the mauler anew, shouting, “Oh yeah!”

Caulder and Terrod stood side-by-side, shields raised and weapons at the ready. Quasea and Zarr began to cast strong destructive spells once again. Sumiko drank a mana potion, ready to pour more healing magic into anyone that was wounded. To the surprise of all of them, two mist workers appeared to carry Wisteria and Cath out of the chamber. Richter looked around and saw that at the back of the chamber, Roswan stood apart from the fray with his arms crossed. At seeing his liege’s attention, however, the elf placed one fist over his chest.

Even his Engineer was in the fight! Richter whooped with glee and picked up his bow again, imbuing a showstopper and targeting the mauler’s face. The monster only had two magical bands holding it in place now, both around its left leg. As he sighted on it, he called out to Hisako, “Can you hit that thing with another binding spell?”

“That was one of the strongest that I know, and the cooldown hasn’t yet elapsed. I have two others that might slow it down, but they are both weaker than the spell I already used.”

“Cast them,” Richter told her. “I’ll do my part!”

“Your part?” Sion asked, still firing arrows nonstop.

“Yeah,” Richter responded grimly, not elaborating any further. Hisako cast her weaker binding spell and more magical bonds appeared. They were noticeably thinner than the ribbons of force her first spell had conjured. They also seemed to enrage the mauler even further. The red aura around its body intensified and it ripped through these new bonds as if they were no stronger than yarn. Still, it gained the party valuable seconds.

Five hundred mana flowed into Richter’s arrow before he released his shot. It flew to the same spot Sion’s had, reopening the closing wound. A note of pain entered the mauler’s screaming roar as the wound opened even wider than before. It stole away hundreds of health, but the mauler was almost free again and it had over three thousand health remaining. Steeling himself for what was about to come, Richter took off his quiver and dropped it at his best friend’s feet. “You might need these,” he shouted over the din of battle.

“What are you doing?” Sion repeated, never lightening up on his rate of fire.

Richter paused for a single moment, affixing his friend with a smile. He cast *Weak Haste* and downed his last mana potion. Sion spared him a concerned glance, a troubled realization growing in his eyes, but it was too late. Richer was gone. As the chaos seed sprinted towards their enemy, he called out, “Don’t worry! Depending on your perspective, this is the *easy*

part!”

He started Cloud Running.

Richter’s first jump got him five feet off the ground. From there he just kept skating forward. Sion shouted after him, but both the sprite and Ulinde kept firing unabated. Both struck the mauler with well-placed arrows, drawing its ire. Hisako finished her second casting. This time green light surrounded her hands as she accessed her Earth magic. Five towers of stone shot up around the mauler. The rock began to flow over the boss, encasing it in stone, but the Hearth Mother had been right.

The simple stone was even less of an impediment than her second spell of binding. The mauler knocked the sludgy rock away like it was shaking off mud, but, combined with the second Light spell, its arms were bound again, at least for a few moments. The red glow around the monster surged brighter as its rage at being constrained soared into madness. Its rocky tomb quivered in response. Cracks appeared in the stone and pieces fell to the ground.

Richter ran faster.

Every passing second gave the mauler a chance to escape. He only had one chance, possibly even a fool’s chance, but he would take it. If he didn’t kill it before it broke free, that was it. The chupacabras had been

fearsome, but he and his party had handled them. This thing... now that it was enraged... it would slaughter them all.

Richter circled around slightly to the left so he could approach the mauler from behind. Downing a stamina potion on the run, he started jumping. Each time he did, he gained another four to six feet in height, but the stamina demands increased massively as well. There was a cost in pain as that happened. Richter's face grew red and his jaw ached from clenching his teeth. He couldn't scream. The only advantage he had was that the mauler was so focused on breaking free that it hadn't noticed him. He had to make his first strike count!

Quasea and Zarr had both changed their plans of attack after seeing Hisako cast her spells. The voluptuous gnome cursed herself for what she was about to do, but it didn't stop her. She ran even closer to the giant monster, Caulder cursing and chasing after, so that she could get within range to use an actual curse. Black light surrounded her hands as she dual cast *Fathomless Night*. The mauler's malignant eyes turned pure black as the spell took hold. The spell was designed to take away not only its sight, but also its sense of smell, touch and hearing. The monster was blinded, but the other effects were completely resisted. Even its visual impairment started fading almost immediately as its high spell resistance began eating at the Dark magic. Quasea couldn't know it, but an effect that should have lasted

twenty minutes would last less than one. She dashed away after a glance at Richter racing towards the behemoth. Caulder followed, his war door shield held high, doing what he could to protect their retreat.

Zarr finished his casting as well, targeting not the mauler, but Hisako's own magic. A Glyph of Solidity appeared on the stone walls of the mauler's prison. The magic was originally designed to strengthen city walls during a siege, but it served the same purpose here. Some of the cracks in the monster's tomb disappeared as the rock's durability was repaired and its defense was increased.

It wasn't enough. Even as Richter crossed the final yards between himself and the mauler, more cracks appeared and the glowing light of the glyph began to flicker. All the while, the red aura of the monster's rage deepened to a more malevolent vermilion hue. To make matters worse, even Hisako's mana was bottoming out from casting so many high-level spells in quick succession.

The last dregs of life drained from the chupacabra the adder had choked to death, allowing Alma to become aware of what was happening once again. She immediately cast about for her master and seeing Richter running *towards* the giant monster, she called to him in a panic. **Master! What are you doing?**

He didn't take his eyes off of the mauler, but he did spare a thought for her. His voice was gentle when he replied, **What I have to, my love.** Then he ignored anything else she had to say. His feet touched down on the mauler's back and the creature noticed him for the first time. It redoubled its efforts to free its arms and a crack appeared in the side of the stone tomb that ran the length of its cage. Richter smiled with malicious anticipation.

Too late, motherfucker!

If Star Wars was right, there was only one way to kill a rancor-type monster. With a savage yell, he jumped off its back, sailing towards its head. His Cloud Running skill activated, letting him almost fly through the air with Black Ice held in both hands. With every ounce of his Strength, screaming in rage, he plunged the powerful weapon through the top of the monster's head! Even with its high defense, it couldn't resist the magically enhanced blade made of a level two metal. The entire weapon sank through its head and exited through the roof of its mouth while it screamed in pain. Richter grinned in intense satisfaction. He'd done it!

That nice moment lasted 2.42 seconds. That was the exact amount of time it took for the rancor to rip one of its arms free, the stone cage exploding outward, and reach up with its gargantuan hand. It grabbed Richter, piercing his stomach with a talon the size of a pickaxe. Its talon punched through his armor like tissue paper, passed through his body and then exited out the other

side, narrowly missing his spine.

Blood fountained from the chaos seed's mouth, spewing over the mauler's head. Then he was flying through the air, having been thrown away like garbage. His Named Weapon remained embedded in the creature's skull. The mauler had lost over a thousand health, but that meant nothing compared to the twenty-five hundred points it still had left.

As Richter flew through the air, his body broken, he had time for one thought before impact. Fuck you, Lucas! Then he hit the ground hard enough to bounce twice. Darkness overtook him.

Alma sped through the air, ignoring the mauler that had now gotten a leg free as well. The Labyrinth monster stared death at the creature that had hurt it. A creature that just so happened to be her master.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! she thought to him with a cry. Her little heart broke at seeing blood run out of him so fast. The Dungeon drank it greedily, finding that it had a particular taste for the chaos seed's life essence. Tears leaked from Alma's eyes as a golden glow surrounded her quivering body. She cast *Weak Slow Heal*, *Minor Slow Heal*, *Minor Stabilize*, *Summon Weak Life Wisp* and *Summon Weak Gold Fox* in quick succession. Her mana dropped by two hundred and sixty-five points, but that was nothing compared to her total mana pool of almost a thousand. A roar

sounded behind her as the mauler got its other arm free. Only one leg was still bound. She didn't care. Richter was her life, and she would gladly sacrifice her own to save his. Perched atop her master's chest, the cat-sized dragonling hissed at the gigantic monster, warning it to stay away.

Healing magic slammed into Richter's body and, impossibly, the bowling ball-sized hole in his body began to close. Ulinde and Sion abandoned their useless barrage and raced towards Richter's prone form, hoping they could save him. Caulder stared after them, yearning to run to his liege, but the soldier was a consummate professional and did as he had been ordered, protecting Quasea and Zarr. Both casters were suffering from spell fatigue, having overexerted themselves with their strongest magics. They could still cast, but their concentration had taken a serious hit, making spell miscasts much more likely. Yoshi remained with the Hearth Mother, who had downed another mana potion and was starting to cast one of her strongest spells.

Sumiko was pouring healing magic into the injured as fast as possible, but though she had initially been able to heal the wounds caused by the chupacabras, the wounds had begun to fester. All three melee Warriors, Terrod and even Randolphus had black lines spreading from their wounds. Whatever had been in the monsters' bites and claws acted like a poison and a blood thinner. No sooner had the bleeding in one stopped than it began in

another. Their health was falling so fast that she was having to hopscotch between patients.

The Healer frantically waved at Roswan, who was still standing near the portal to the Entrance Chamber. More mist workers formed and began to carry the wounded to safety. She downed her last mana potion even as she poured more magic into prolonging the lives of the wounded. The sprite cast a worried glance at Richter's body across the cavern, but the mauler was almost free. She wouldn't help anyone if she rushed forward and was killed by the creature. Instead, she stayed with her patients, saving the lives that she could and telling herself that even if Richter died, he would be reborn. The tears falling from her eyes gave lie to the false comfort.

Yoshi stared at the mauler as it finally freed itself. He had already decided that if it got close enough, he would trigger his strongest attack, *Flurry of Blades*. For three seconds, the damage and speed of his attacks would increase dramatically. The attack drained 45% of his max stamina, and would probably have no effect against the mauler, but it might give Hisako the time she needed to escape. He had taken a small wound from the chupacabra as well, and blood ran down his side even as magical poison ate away at his organs. The sword adept still stood tall, fueled by an iron will and an unyielding dedication to the focal principle of his life. He would stand between his loved ones and those that would do them harm. He would

stand tall until the last beat of his heart and shout, “No.”

He glared at the monster that had endured his strongest attack, both blades held at the ready. His chest heaved, struggling to draw in air as he readied himself for the last moments of his life. Yoshi glared at the mauler as it glared at Richter.

While all of this was happening, Hisako had been preparing some of her strongest healing magic. Only the secret *adept* rank perk of her Light Magic skill let her cast magic so far away from her target. She had already cast a diagnostic spell, and knew that while Alma’s quick healing had prolonged Richter’s life, it wasn’t enough to ensure it. A roar almost made her miscast, but she finished her spell, sending a bolt of healing energy at her ally that was one-part lifesaving, one-part electric shock. Even though she finished her casting, her face drained of blood. The mauler was free and her spell had drawn its attention. It had abandoned its focus on Richter and was coming straight for her.

Hisako used almost all of her remaining mana to summon a protective wall. It was the same spell of golden light she had used to defend against the bugbear attack months before. The shield was ten yards wide, ten high and three deep. The spell was *active*, so she could feed more mana into it, but it also meant she would suffer horribly if the spell form was destroyed.

Wake up, master! Wake up! Alma had been screaming into her master's mind. Her voice could not reach him, but Hisako's electrifying healing magic made him feel like he'd just been jump started by a car battery. His wound healed completely and pain shot through his heart. As Alma screamed as loudly as she could, **MASTER! WAKE UP!** his eyes shot open and he sat up abruptly.

"Ahhhhh!" Richter screamed, grabbing at his heart. "Who's been dancing on my chest?" he shouted, looking around wildly. He had lost a massive amount of blood and his wits were addled, but the mauler's roar brought it all flooding back. His hand shot down to his abdomen, expecting to find a bloody hole. Instead, his fingers found only tender, unbroken skin. It didn't escape his notice that there was a bowling ball-sized hole in his chest armor.

"Richter!" Hisako screamed. "We need to leave! I cannot hold it back!" Putting proof to her belief, the mauler attacked. That very first blow made cracks in the transparent gold barrier, and Hisako felt it like a spike into her brain. Another blow shook the shield and a small vessel in the Hearth Mother's eye exploded, flooding the white orb with blood.

"Richter!" Hisako cried again, but weaker this time. She let loose a grunt as she was forced to one knee by another hammering blow. Yoshi prepared, both blades ready and pointing towards the mauler, poised to attack

the moment his lady's magic failed. Blood flowed freely from one of her nostrils, tracing over her lips and chin. The other party members had all retreated to the shimmering energy field that would let them leave the Dungeon and hopefully escape. They all knew that if they lost this battle though, there was no guarantee that the mauler wouldn't follow them and enact a horrible revenge.

Richter blinked in confusion, but started getting up. Hisako called out one final time, her voice cracking as her mind was overwhelmed, feeding mana into a defense that was too weak to withstand the fury of the behemoth before her. "This reptile is beyond us!" she cried as she collapsed to the ground. Few in The Land would have had the pure will needed to maintain her spell while suffering the agony that racked her body, even as the mauler continued its *Rage*-fueled attack.

Her final words pierced the haze his near-death had conjured. Richter stood, Alma flying up into the air, ready for whatever he needed her to do. Yoshi dropped his swords once the Hearth Mother fell to both knees and, cradling her, began running towards the portal. The defensive spell moved with them but the mauler followed, continuing to rain blows on the golden shield and the Life Master's mind. More cracks appeared with every blow, and Hisako let out a low moan of suffering.

At Caulder's order, the rest of the party had retreated to the entrance

portal with the wounded. They were bleeding and battered, but still were unwilling to abandon the two Masters, not until Caulder made it an order. A lifetime of leading soldiers gave the sergeant's voice a snap that could not be refused. He planned to see them to safety, then return for his liege, even if it was the last thing he ever did.

Another blow struck the shield, and this time the cracks spread from one edge of the shield to the other. The mauler's talon punctured the defense, only to be stopped by the last fading integrity of Hisako's magic. The sprite Master nearly lost control, but managed to pour the last drops of her mana into her spell. It was clear to everyone that the next attack would destroy the only thing keeping them safe.

Richter made a decision. He began running towards the mauler once again. Alma flew above him.

What are you doing, master? There was panic in her voice. She was sure her love was once again about to do something stupid. **If we bond, I can keep you safe!**

What I have to, my love, came his reply. His tone was resigned to whatever would happen. **I need you to distract the mauler with a Psi Blast. Do this for me and we can win!** He hoped she couldn't hear the lie in his words. While he did need the creature to be distracted, the real reason he

wouldn't bond with her was because he would probably be dead within the next sixty seconds. He could live with that, but he would not take her with him.

The mauler drew back its arm to attack one more time, and Richter triggered his Ring of Shadow Shift. He had promised himself that he'd never enter the Shadow Realm again at less than full strength, but there was no choice. Once again, the contrast of light and dark was enhanced and the shadows seemed to reach for him. Richter wasted no time, stepping into the shadow cast by the floating red gem at the center of the cavern and a broken red column sticking up like a decayed tooth. The mauler's arm arced down to steal the lives of his friends and family, but then time slowed to a crawl. The monster's descending claw slowed like it was moving through honey. Alma slowly beat her wings, her mouth open in a silent scream of protest at him risking his life yet again. A countdown timer appeared on the side of his interface showing the five seconds of "real time" he had to exit the Shadow Realm.

The mauler roared in fury, but it sounded like a distant echo to Richter. The counter ticked down to four. The chaos seed tensed, remembering the shadow bat that had done him so much damage, but he didn't see any shadow creatures and he didn't plan on staying around long enough to be found and attacked.

As the boss's arm continued to slowly fall, Richter ran up behind it as quickly as his aching body would allow. With the time-dilating effects of the Shadow Realm, he had more than enough time to cross the chamber. Once he was in position, he took two items from his Bag of Holding. The first was the last silver potion in the village. He downed the Potion of Selak's Luck in one go. He'd need every ounce he could get if he was going to trade his soul for the lives of his people.

The next item he summoned from the interdimensional space of his bag was a simple, innocuous brown leather pouch. As was so often the case, however, it was what was inside that counted. He had never used this item before because of the massive danger it posed, but as his granddaddy always used to say, "Don't worry about spilling water when you're on a sinking ship."

It was time to roll the dice.

The chaos seed opened the pouch as the counter ticked down, showing he had only two seconds of real time left. A sound like the slow and muted breaking of glass reverberated through the Shadow Realm. The mauler's arm had connected with Hisako's shield and the magic was shattering. Richter turned his head to look at the Hearth Mother. He saw that even in her confused state, there was an expression of profound sadness upon her face. Yoshi's head was turned away and he was hunched over his liege,

using his own body as a shield, loyal to the last.

Richter began to scream in rage that he was too late, but then he saw something that he had missed before. Lying almost at the mauler's feet, there was movement. Two eyes phased into existence as the Harbinger made sure that this invader would regret coming into its Dungeon. With his heart thudding in his chest, the timer ticked down to "1." Two heartbeats later, a smile grew on his face. In the slowed time of the Shadow Realm, Richter could tell that the high steel adder was moving up faster than the mauler's arm was falling down. He nodded in appreciation at his old pet even though it couldn't see it. The snake had given him the only thing he needed to defeat his enemy.

Hope.

Without much time left, Richter poured sparkling red powder into his hand.

*Be warned! Using magic beyond your skill level can have serious consequences. Do you truly wish to use **Blood crystal** to augment your **Blood Magic**? Yes or No?*

Grimly, Richter entered the fortifications of his mindscape and thought through his decision one more time. There was only one thing he knew that could save him, the Deeper Magic of Blood. If he could tame the

mauler, he could make it his own. The problem was that the creature's level was so high that he couldn't even see it with *Analyze*. That meant its level was at least fifty or higher.

The success of his *Tame* spell was normally dependent on his skill level in Beast Bonding vs the level of the creature in front of him. If the mauler's level had been equal to his skill level of eight, there would have been a fifty-fifty chance to ensnare it. In the best-case scenario, if the mauler was level fifty he would have a 14% chance to win. The only thing that gave Richter any hope was his own Dragonkin nature and his bond to Alma. They gave him another +20 and +14 levels when taming a reptile. It could increase his chances to almost 50%... if the mauler's level was as low as he prayed.

Richter knew that wasn't the case.

That was why, in this realm of shadow, he was preparing to risk his very sanity. There was one way to make his Blood magic stronger... but there would be a cost. When Sion had shown him the patch of Blood crystal growing in the crystal garden, Richter had known it was powerful. The prompt he'd gained had proved the same, but as with all things in The Land, power and danger were close bedfellows. He had already lost himself once to the fury of Blood magic. What would happen if he used the red crystal to greatly magnify its effect? How could it not increase the cost as well?

This fear was why he had never used the Blood crystal before. He had been content to simply wait until his skill was higher before he tried to tame stronger monsters. As the countdown ticked down to “1” though, he knew his time had run out. Richter looked at the prompt again and chose “Yes.”

The Blood crystals rose from his hand and formed a mini tornado. It flared slightly, as if lit by unseen lightning, but even this light was muted by the Shadow Realm. Before Richter could do anything, the crystals shot into his eyes, nose and mouth. The whites of his eyes grew blood red and his hands began to tremor uncontrollably.

In his mindscape, Richter’s avatar saw a tidal wave of blood sweep over the surrounding forest and break over the village. It covered everything he could see in thick red liquid, reaching almost to the ramparts of his mental fortification. If not for the defenses he’d created with Alma, he would be drowning in rage and emotion. Though it was just a mental construct, Richter couldn’t help but shiver at hearing the lapping of the blood waves.

*You have used **Blood Crystal** to augment your **Blood Magic**! The +25% boost to your Blood magic spellpower is increased a further +25% as this crystal was grown from your own blood.*

*Know This! A **Blood Coven** has noticed that higher Blood magic has been*

accessed. They seek the one who infringes upon their domain.

*Know This! Your **Necklace of Scry Defense** protects you from their tracking magic.*

Power surged through him! His Blood Magic flared in his soul, demanding to be used. It was only his mental defenses and his Self-Awareness skill that allowed him to retain his sense of self, that allowed him to remain free from the unfettered emotion of the Deeper Magic. Not much time remained for him to stay in the Shadow Realm. Sighing, and praying that he wasn't about to become a red smear on the ground, he stepped into a nearby shadow cast by a pillar.

The pouch he had taken from his Bag of Holding had contained two measures of Blood crystal, meaning one still remained. Even in this time of great need, he wasn't sure what the item would do to him. Now that he saw the ocean of blood that had almost overcome his mind using just one dose, he couldn't bring himself to use the second. The 50% boost to his magic would just have to do the trick. He couldn't even spare the time to wonder what the so-called Blood Coven was. That was a worry for another day. If he had another day. The last measure of Blood crystal remained in his pouch. The counter dropped to zero and Richter reentered normal space.

The world snapped back into focus, full of the scent of blood and the

screaming roar of monsters. The chaotic reptile completed its lunge attack, sinking its fangs deep into the mauler's descending hand. The monster's arm locked into place, frozen into tetanus by the now lightning-based poison of the adder's bite. It swung its other long clawed hand at the snake's dangling body, prepared to slice it into pieces, but Alma had spent Richter's five seconds in the Shadow Realm well.

She triggered her most focused *Psi Blast* from only five feet behind the monster's head. Even the Labyrinth boss had limited resistance to the Deeper Magic of Thought, and its body froze for three seconds, its attacking arm falling limp. For once, Yoshi's emotions were written plainly on his face. His eyes were open with shock as he spirited Hisako's unconscious body the final fifty yards to the portal leading to the Entrance Chamber.

The only souls left in the Dungeon to fight the Labyrinthine horror were Richter, Alma and his former pet adder, as perhaps was always the way things were meant to be. As soon as Richter exited the Shadow Realm he began casting. Even as his mental avatar watched the seething blood lap against the walls of his mental defenses, words of Power fell from his lips. The spell came easier than ever before. The incantation seemed to almost want to escape from his mouth.

A red glow surrounded his hands, and five seconds later, he cast *Tame!* By that time the mauler had shaken off the effects of Alma's psychic

attack, and the cooldown wouldn't elapse for more than a minute and a half. Another Thought attack was impossible in that moment, and a moment was all the high steel adder had. Even as Alma tried a standard magic attack that was certain not to work, the mauler lifted its arm so that the snake's body dangled above the ground. The chaotic reptile had started winding its body around the mauler's arm, but had made little progress in the scant seconds the creature had been stunned.

With an ear-splitting scream of rage, the boss swung its other taloned hand down. Each of the three claws sliced completely through the adder's body, causing three segments of the snake's body to fall to the ground and killing the Harbinger instantly. The high steel scales clanged off each other as they fell in a clatter. The snake's mouth and the remaining four feet of its body remained embedded in the mauler's hand. Almost in disdain, the monster plucked off the head and tossed it to the ground. That was when it noticed the red glow.

Richter had not wasted a moment since leaving the Shadow Realm. When the mauler lifted its arm to strike the Harbinger, he had already laid a hand on its back leg and prepared to use his Blood magic. He could see his old pet attacking the monster that had almost killed so many of his loved ones. It struck him that, if not for its courage, he could have already lost everything. And that in turn reminded him of how so many men and women,

mothers and fathers, children and loved ones, relied on him to do the very same. To stand up against even impossible odds and keep them safe.

In that instant, he realized that everything came down to this one moment. That if he failed, he might lose much more than just mastery of this place. That the mauler might even break out of the Dungeon and kill every single soul in his village. Every man, woman and child that slept easy in the belief that Richter would fight and die for them might die themselves on this monster's claws and fangs. All of it, everything he had made, everything he had sacrificed for, everything that meant anything in this world... it all rested on this one momentous second.

It was overwhelming, but then a face came to his mind. The face of a young girl that had died. A child that had been murdered because he had been too weak to save her. A child named Petal. He would do anything to have her live again, but he couldn't bring her back. All he could do was... protect the people that she had left behind.

With that realization, he knew what he had to do. Looking at Alma, who was bravely firing a lightning bolt at the mauler even though she was smart enough to know that her tier-one spell would accomplish next to nothing, he sent her his love. Not in a psychic message. He could not risk her interfering. He just willed her all of the love in his heart.

Then, as the severed pieces of the Harbinger dropped to the ground, he poured the second measure of Blood crystal into his hand and said goodbye to his sanity.

*Be warned! Using magic beyond your skill level can have serious consequences! Do you truly wish to use a second dose of **Blood crystal** to augment your **Blood Magic**? The consequences will be increased twofold. Yes or No?*

He couldn't wait. He couldn't be logical. He couldn't let the fear that he had pushed down rise up again. He chose "Yes!" The crimson whirlwind formed again and he had time for one last thought. This time, he did share it. **Alma, I love you.**

She looked down from where she flew, having exhausted all of her ranged attacks. She felt just sick that she couldn't do more to help her love. The dragonling had even considered getting close enough to claw at the mauler when she heard the sorrowful tone in Richter's thoughts. Her heart dropped, though she did not know why, **Master?**

She was just in time to see the Blood crystal fly into his nose, mouth and eyes. Richter's body shook for one second, shocked by the pure power flowing into his mortal frame. In that moment, she checked on his mindscape and saw the beautiful setting she had sculpted was drowned in hot red blood.

Only the top of Richter's mental defenses remained above the flow, and that by only a few feet. Her hyper-intelligent mind immediately connected the dots: why he had refused to bond, that the swirling cloud of red dust must have been Blood crystal, and that he had already used one dose.

A *whoosshhh* sound caught her attention and she saw a second tidal wave of blood approaching Richter's mindscape, one that would drown him for sure. Even as her physical body started flying down towards him, her mind reached out, prepared to dive into his mindscape. She knew she could never reach him before the raw *id* of the Blood wave took control of his consciousness, but she had to try!

She would even have joined him in that madness, except for the look on his avatar's face. He was looking right up at her with an expression of love and acceptance, one hand raised, telling her not to come for him. That was the last sight she had of him before the wave of hot, salty blood, twice as large as the last, struck his avatar with crushing force. His mind, everything that defined him, was drowned in raw emotion.

The time-stretching effect of his mindscape made it seem to Alma that her master was consumed by the Blood wave almost in slow motion, but it actually took less than a second for Richter to lose control. When the mauler noticed the red glow behind it and bent down to look between its legs, Richter had already laid his hand upon it. By the time the semi-sapient

creature registered that this was the man who had hurt it, a savage grin had found its way onto Richter's face. As it started to reach down with a roar of anger, talons poised to pierce the chaos seed's body, Richter had already dismissed the prompts telling him the effects of the second dose of Blood crystal.

*You have used a second dose of **Blood Crystal** grown from your own blood to augment your **Blood Magic**! The previous +50% boost to your Blood magic spellpower has been increased to +100%*

*Know This! A **Blood Coven** now knows of your existence and may recognize you by your magical signature*

*Know This! Your **Necklace of Scry Defense** protects you from their tracking magic*

The mauler's hand reached down to savage the man that had caused it so much pain, and Richter looked back with no concern at all. He just stood there with that easy smile on his face. The monster was his. There was no other choice, there was no other way, there was no future in which Richter's will was not made manifest!

He triggered his Blood magic and the energy in his hand flowed into the monster. Time seemed to not just slow but actually stop. The mind of the mauler struggled to stay free, but against the unbridled passion of the

chaos seed and his diamond-strong belief in his own power, it could not endure. The silent resonance that he had already been expecting rung both of their souls and tuned them to ring as one. The major notes of Richter's soul commanded the minor chord of the mauler. Until their frequencies once again fell out of sync, the monster would follow his commands.

The mauler's arms quivered, only a few feet away from him, but literally unable to harm its new master. Richter had won. The monster was his. Let The Land itself shake in fear at the rumble of his passing. He was Richter! He was Lord! He was God!

Richter made eye contact and established a mental connection with his new pet. He could feel its anger and hatred walled off behind a lattice of Blood magic that would last for the next forty-eight hours. The tovuut mauler was his.

It was silent in the Dungeon. The iron tang of blood and the corrupt scent of filth were thick and heavy on the air. Richter surveyed the devastation of the battlefield with supreme satisfaction. Once again, he was still standing and his enemies had been laid low. He cast a smug glance at the mauler behind him. The only one remaining was now his slave. This was good.

A mental order was all it took to have the mauler kneel and push its

face into the ground. The chaos seed walked up to the giant paying obeisance and unceremoniously pulled Black Ice from its skull. A spray of purple blood fled the wound. Each drop fell upon the churned ground of the Dungeon and was greedily drunk by the soil.

The monster screamed anew and another eight points of its health fell away. Richter thought about healing it, but then he felt its true consciousness try and break free again. Harming his pet had weakened the bond between them, but Richter's will and Blood Magic were so strong that he barely noticed as he flayed its mind and soul. The mauler's body showed no reaction, completely under the control of his magic, but its silent screams brought a wicked glee to Richter's heart. All who opposed him should suffer. This was as it should be. This was right.

Torturing the mauler's spirit occupied his attention until someone came through the portal. Richter didn't even notice at first, he was having so much fun taunting and torturing the mauler's. He did not see the look of dawning horror on Sion's face as the sprite took in the tableau before him: The monster that had nearly killed them all was now kneeling before Richter with its head pressed into the ground. What truly made icy fingers seize his heart however, was the expression on his friend's face. There was no empathy, no consideration, only a malevolent glee from whatever he was doing.

The sprite took a step forward, and that was when Richter saw him.

“Ah, good!” The chaos seed smiled with a cruel twist to his lips, “We have much to discuss.” Alma continued to fly nearby, looking at her master with heartrending concern.

The sprite kept his distance and asked the only relevant question, “What happened?”

Richter looked at him with madness in his eyes, “I won.”

Then the chaos seed started giving orders. His savage heart thrummed with pleasure at seeing the horror on Sion’s face. Caulder reentered the Dungeon, and his face also grew sallow with fear upon hearing his lord’s commands. When Sion started shaking his head, Richter decided an example would have to be made. If he didn’t, others might think they could challenge his absolute will. It was a shame. Until now Sion had been useful. Richter drew Black Ice and used the momentary distraction of the lights dimming to close half the distance to the sprite.

All Sion had time to do was reach down for his own sheathed weapon, his eyes wide with shock, before Richter was suddenly there in front of him, a horrid smile on his face and his Named Weapon raised high in the air.

The chaos seed could not wait to feel hot blood splash across his face

and taste the coppery tang on his tongue! All he needed to do was...

Richter thought he heard static and then his mind plunged into a fathomless hole.

CHAPTER 88 – Day 149 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



“Lord Richter. Lord Richter, are you awake?” The voice was soft and feminine.

“Lady Hisako?” he asked in a confused voice. He felt so weary.

“Yes,” she answered in a relieved voice. Richter thought he saw a golden glow, but then comforting blackness claimed him.

When he woke again, he could feel Alma’s warm body on his chest. He tilted his head down and smiled at his familiar. There was no better feeling than the warmth of one who loved you. Stroking her scales, she picked her head up and thought to him sleepily, **Are you alright now?**

He smiled at her bemusedly, **Of course I am. We won.**

Alma picked her draconian head up, looking directly into his face. Her voice was hesitant, **Do you not remember what happened?**

What do you mean?

If Alma could have sighed, she would have. Instead, she just showed him. He saw himself tell Sion that they had won. Then he saw what he had forgotten. He saw himself verbally declare war on the Kingdom of Yves. He saw himself tell Sion to rally the village forces and that they would burn every town they came across. Randolphus and Terrod had reentered the cavern and he'd given them the same instructions. When they'd hesitated, Richter had accused his Companions of treason and told them the penalty was death. He saw himself close with Sion, then raise the blade of his darkstone sword above his head... Suddenly, Alma's view of him got much closer and he collapsed.

Richter blinked against the harsh truth of the memory. Then it came back to him, how using Blood magic at such a high level had overwhelmed his mental defenses. The crimson ocean drowning his consciousness. Knowing that, it was no surprise that he'd turned into a megalomaniac. He remembered now the thick and salty red wave that had swept over his mental avatar. There had been panic for a moment, but then that was replaced with... a savage freedom. He hadn't even tried to get free of the Blood magic's hold. It had felt too good!

Remembering now, he shuddered in both revulsion and excitement. To feel that free... it was something he wanted to feel every moment of every day. It was something a part of him had always craved. It had felt almost

sexual. Seeing the reality of what that unfettered emotion did, however, filled him with loathing. He could remember all of it now, including the excitement he'd felt when he'd threatened his friends. It wasn't an idle threat. He had actually been about to execute Terrod, Randolphus... and Sion. He shuddered again, this time just in fear of what he could become without restrictions.

He played the mental feed through his mind again, stopping at his collapse. Another memory peeked through his mental fog: the static sound.

Did you use Psi Blast on me?

Yes, master. Alma's tone was sorrowful, but she drew her body upright. She didn't shy away from the truth, and awaited any punishment her master would deliver.

It was quiet for several moments. His own voice was full of guilt and regret when he answered her, "I'm sorry you had to do that, my love, but you were right. I would rather die than live like that. I used magic that I couldn't control. Thank you for stopping me before I hurt someone."

This time, Richter did hear a sigh of relief in his mind, **I love you, master.**

I love you, Alma. He swept her into his arms and held her close. Her small face nuzzled his cheek. He was happy for her closeness and her

love. Especially so because he remembered something else. The warning about the Blood Coven. He had enough enemies. He just prayed he hadn't made another, one powerful enough to detect him just because he'd used Blood Magic. Richter had wondered for a long time if he'd just been overly paranoid for wearing his Necklace of Scry Defense. It had saved him though. It just went to show you the old adage was true. 'You were only paranoid if they weren't out to getcha, and they're definitely out to getcha.'

"I am glad to see you are yourself again, my lord," Randolphus said, stepping out of the shadows.

"Gaaaah! Oh my god! What the fuck, man?" Richter held a hand to his chest over his thudding heart. He had had no idea the Spy had been standing there.

"It seemed prudent to watch over you after your... episode, my lord," was Randolphus's cultured response.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Richter calmed himself. "I still think you just scared me on purpose, but I suppose I should thank you for watching over me. And apologize for what I said while under the influence of the Blood magic."

Silence reigned for long moments, "Was that the apology, my lord?"

"Yeah," Richter responded, still irritated from having been scared, "it

was.”

“Very good then, my lord.” Richter was *sure* he saw the bastard smile for a second. “Should I extend those very same apologies to your other Companions?”

Richter eyed the chamberlain, and decided not to reply to the snark, “Anything to report? What time is it?”

“You have slept for several hours, my lord. The sun is just now rising. As for a report of what happened while you slumbered, the tovuut mauler is still in the Dungeon. Your new pet would not allow anyone near you until your familiar ordered it away.”

“I make stay, master,” Alma said excitedly. It was still weird hearing her voice in the real world. She wasn’t nearly as eloquent as when she spoke in his mind, but it was insanely cute.

“Since when can you control my pets, you little beastie?” Richter asked affectionately.

“Not control,” she said with the same happy tone. “Suggest.” Then she sent him a much more detailed psychic communication. She clearly enjoyed speaking aloud, but it was still difficult for her. Alma explained that she couldn’t control his pets, but by forming mental connections with them, she could send them mental images. Her strong psychic connection with him

gave serious weight to those “suggestions.”

In the case of the mauler, she had just told it to let the others take Richter to be healed. After a few minutes, it had walked away and they had been able to gather his comatose body. She’d then cast *Dungeon Transport*, getting the entire group to the entrance. After that, he’d been taken to his chamber and placed in a magical sleep by the Hearth Mother until the effects of the Blood magic had worn off. Hisako had stayed by his side until he’d started speaking normally again.

“Hmmm,” Richter responded with a nod. “Anything else?”

“Lady Hisako requested to speak with you when you woke. By your leave?”

Richter nodded and the chamberlain sent a guard to tell the Life Master he was awake. Randy handed his lord a small pouch that clinked and then excused himself saying he had to grab something from his office. The chaos seed was happy to let him do his thing. His body was still sore from the battle so he just wanted to relax and deal with his waiting prompts. He needed some water first though. He thought about getting up to get a glass, but then a wonderful, life-changing thought occurred to him. Still laying down, he cast *Summon Mist Worker*. The mists coalesced into the faceless form. With a self-satisfied smile, he ordered it to bring him a glass of water

from the other side of the room.

How lazy can you be? Alma thought to him with exasperation.

Richter just sniffed at her lack of imagination. The worker handed over the glass, but then it was his turn to be exasperated when Alma ordered the creature to start scratching the scales along her neck ridge. She decided to completely ignore his glare. Putting his hypocritical familiar out of his mind, he examined the brown pouch Randolphus had handed him. He didn't do more than loosen the strings before he immediately cinched them shut again.

His heart was beating in anticipation of another battle, but thankfully, Alma hadn't seen. The dragonling's eyes were closed and she was crooning from the mist worker's scratching. He breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing he needed in his condition was his familiar mauling him. Turning his body slightly, he opened the pouch again where she couldn't see. Faint blue-white light shone through the small hole he'd created.

You have
found:
Psi Crystal

Durability: 10/10

Item Class: Scarce

Level: 43

Weight: 0.9 kg.

Traits: This crystal is the captured psychic energy of a **level 43 Chupacabra**. This energy can be utilized by Mental creatures to boost their growth and stats. The energy may also be used by anyone with access to Mental

	magic to greatly augment their spells. It can also be used by Mental creatures to augment their capabilities for a short time. Any usage will consume the energy all at once. Further uses of this energy may be possible and will have to be discovered.
You have found: Psi Crystal	Durability: 10/10 Item Class: Scarce Level: 41 Weight: 0.9 kg. Traits: This crystal is the captured psychic energy of a level 41 Chupacabra...

Eighty-four potential Psi Points! He was tempted to spend them on more enhancements, but then he thought about how powerful Alma had been after consuming that energy during the fight with Nien. Richter cinched the bag closed again. He'd decide what to do with the crystals later. For now, he turned his attention to his prompts. The first one showed the experience Alma's *Brain Drain* had earned against the chupacabra. It was swiftly followed by the sweetest sound that could be heard in any world.

You have been awarded 228,515 experience (base 2,611,605 x 0.07 x 1.25) from Brain Drain against Level 44 Chupacabra.

TRING!

You have reached level 39! Through hard work you have moved forward

along your path. You are awarded the following points to distribute:

	Per Level	Total
Stat Points	As a Chaos Seed, you gain 6 Stat Points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4	18
Talent Points	As a Chaos Seed, you receive 15 Talent Points instead of the usual 10. You receive an additional 15 Talent Points from your Profession and Specialty for having a 100% affinity in Enchanting	120
Chaos Points	You receive 8 Chaos Points due to your Blessing by the Lords of Chaos	84
Skill % Points	+25% to the skill of your choice	+25%

Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

*Now that you have progressed more than one level, you must allocate your **Stat** and **Skill Percentage** Points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.*

Alma had gained a level as well.

*Congratulations! Your familiar has reached level **43**!*

With her celestial bonus, she now had 5.10 Ability Points to invest. Not only that, but the new level had increased all of her attributes making her that much stronger and deadlier. He took a quick look at her status page to

see if he wanted to invest her new APs.

Name: Alma	Level: 43, 4%	Race: Psi Dragonling
STATS		
Health: 147	Mana: 1029 <i>Regen/min: 58.65</i>	Stamina: 200 <i>Regen/min: 11.4</i>
ATTRIBUTES* <i>*+5% Celestial Spark</i>		
Strength: 5	Agility: 39	Dexterity: 40
Constitution: 15	Endurance: 20	Intelligence: 103
Wisdom: 103	Charisma: 20	Luck: 20
SPELL POWER BONUSES		
Air 50%	Life 50%	
RESISTANCES		
Air 50%	Mental 100%	Life 50%
ABILITIES (Unused Points: 5.10)		
Psi Bond – Lvl 7, points to next level: 6 Psi Blast – Lvl 3, points to next level: 3 Brain Drain – Lvl 7, points to next level: 7 Psi Channeling – Lvl 2, points to next level: 2		

Her stats and attributes were massive! She had over one *thousand* points of mana now, and thanks to her insanely high Intelligence score, every spell she cast would be 51.5% stronger. Likewise, her one hundred and three points of Wisdom had increased her base spell resistance by 51.5% as well. That meant, coupled with her previous resistances, she had over a 100% resistance in Air and Life magic. Any attack spells of those Powers not only

should have no effect, they might actually make her stronger!

Richter took a second to just marvel at his amazing soul familiar. The only area she was lacking in was her Strength and health. Even at level forty-three, she was still a *small* creature and suffered under a negative modifier for Str. Her small body also only contained so much health. Despite all that, Alma was not a creature to be trifled with. To further that idea along, he decided to boost her primary attack.

You have chosen to increase your familiar's ability Psi Blast to Level 4		
Effect	Level 3	Level 4
Stun	8-10 seconds	10-15 seconds
Health Damage	10-20	20-30
Disorientation	5 minutes -10% Agi and Dex	10 minutes -20% Agi and Dex
AoE* <small>*tightening or widening the beam increases or decreases the effects</small>	<i>Max Width: 20 feet</i> <i>Min Width: 3 feet</i> <i>Range: 20 feet</i>	<i>Max Width: 30 feet</i> <i>Min Width: 2 feet</i> <i>Range: 25 feet</i>
Cooldown	3.5 minutes	3 minutes

Confuse		2 minutes
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His girl had just gotten a major upgrade! The health damage still wasn't a game changer, but the true value of Alma's primary attack were the debuffs it caused. Not only would *Stun* and *Disorient* last longer now, but her *Psi Blast* had also gained a new capability. Any creatures caught in the AoE of her spell might be *Confused*. Anyone with that debuff might attack their friends, walk off a cliff... hell, they might even heal their enemies! He could just see her swooping low and unseen over an enemy warband. The effect only lasted two minutes, but with her huge AoE, an entire hostile force might wipe themselves out in that time. Alma smiled her draconian smile at him, then settled back down in sleep.

With her taken care of, Richter now had the awesome responsibility of investing his own points. First, he pulled up his status page.

Name: Richter	Age: 24	Level: 39, 11%
Race: Chaos Seed	Profession: Enchanter	Languages: Sapient Mortals
Reputation: Lvl 5 "You are a man worth following."	Specialty: Essence	Alignment: Chaotic (2) Neutral
STATS		
Health: 812	Mana: 774 <i>Regen/min:</i> 32.4	Stamina: 410 <i>Regen/min:</i> 33.6

ATTRIBUTES

Strength: 32 <i>(base: 30 w. Dragonkin + Goblinhold: 2)</i>	Agility: 32	Dexterity: 38 <i>(base: 23 + items: 15)</i>
Constitution: 62 <i>(base: 61 + mark: 1%)</i>	Endurance: 41	Intelligence: 73 <i>(base: 66 + Quickening: 10%)</i>
Wisdom: 45	Charisma: 36 <i>(base: 30 + Honorable: 4 + Impassioned: 5%)</i>	Luck: 49 <i>(base: 29 + Vassal: 20)</i>

SPELL POWER BONUSES

Air 50%	Light 5%	Fire 20%
Life 50%	Blood 5%	Earth 10%

RESISTANCES

(Types of Magic)

Air 50%	Earth 25%	Fire 20%
Life 50%	Mental 65%	Spiritual 5%
Light 5%	Blood 10%	

RESISTANCES

(Schools of Magic)

Enchantment 32%

ABILITIES

Limitless: 100% affinity in any and every skill

Gift of Tongues: Ability to comprehend almost any sapient language

Fast Learner: +30% to speed of skill advancement

Bounty of Life: +30% growth for the physical manifestation of your Place of Power

Psi Bond, Level 7:

+60% Mental Resistance

Maximum Communication Distance 1750 yards

Eye contact offers the chance to connect with other creatures in a limited way

Psi Blast, Level 3*: Can fire a beam of concentrated psychic energy causing health damage, Stun and Disorientation. Can fire 3 beams every 5 minutes.

Brain Drain, Level 7*: Can absorb the mental energy of a creature, draining them of health, mana and stamina. Can Stun creatures up to level

31. At death will absorb 7% of the creature's total experience. Chance to absorb a poignant memory from the creature upon death.

Glass Flame*: Can breathe colorless fire over anything within twenty yards. 50-100 Damage over 7 seconds.

x5 Damage to durability of items.

Feel of Chaos: Detect sources of Chaos within 200 yards

* while in Messeji form

The destruction of his chestplate meant he had lost eight Strength points. He hoped that Krom or Hisako could repair it, but it wouldn't be done before the battle. Either way, Krom had promised to have his new armor prepared so he'd have to do without that enchantment anyway. Richter was tempted to put points into Strength to make up for the loss. Hitting things really hard was always a useful trait, after all.

The truth was, he just didn't have a Strength build though. While he wasn't afraid of a stand-up fight, he was seeing more and more that he was just outclassed in terms of melee. Even if he'd invested every Attribute Point and every skill percentage into melee combat, the ghaſt would ſtill have barely noticed before he had cut Richter in half. He might invest more points there in the future, but with a battle looming in the next few hours, he needed to put points in something that would immediately increase his chances of survival and ſuccess.

More health was always good, but he'd juſt found a ring that

increased his health by +82. Of course, there were other perks to Constitution, just as there were multiple perks to every Attribute. Now that he knew there were secondary Attributes just waiting to be discovered, his allocation of Attribute Points was more important than ever. Unfortunately, he had no idea which of his primary stats affected the secondary ones, so for now it was a crap shoot in that regard.

His Charisma was probably to thank for his allies the wood sprites and his new vassal kindir, but with thirty-six points, he was already doing fine in that department. Agility and Dexterity were clutch, but just didn't feel like the right investment at this moment. He had already invested six points into Endurance just the other day as well. That left Wisdom, Intelligence, and, of course, Luck.

Taking a deep breath, he put six of his precious points into Luck and twelve more into Wisdom. The Luck should help him with his options when delving into the Sea of Chaos and the Wisdom wouldn't just increase his mana regen, it would increase his overall magical resistance. He never felt any different when he increased these two attributes, so he hoped he'd made the right choice. Different or not, his magic replenishment improved from 32.4 to 41 MP/min.

His twenty-five skill percentage points went into Enchanting like they always did. He decided to keep his Chaos Points in reserve; it was too

expensive just to dive into the Sea of Chaos unless he planned to make a purchase. He also knew almost nothing about them, so he was loathe to spend the points until he had a concrete reason. His Talent Points though... it was time to fully map his Profession.

When he had first explored his Talent tree, there had been a few that he hadn't been able to afford. That meant, on the starry sky of his Profession page, there were some spheres beyond those that remained completely hidden. With a faint smile, he decided he was tired of that. He might not have enough TPs to fully uncover his Profession, but he decided to give it the ol' college try.

He had come to think of his Profession much as he had the village research, in terms of tiers. In the center of both his Profession and Specialty Talent trees was a large central sphere, the blue reading *Enchanter* and the red reading *Essence*, respectively. More spheres radiated out from both centers, more globes radiated out from those and so on. He thought of the orbs closest to the center spheres as "tier-one." Those branching off of each tier-one ball were tier-two, etc.

There were six tier-one Talents, making roughly six sections of his Talent tree. He had already fully explored one of the sections, but Talents remained hidden on the other five. Because of his new macroenchantments, he was extremely curious about ensPELLing larger objects.

The first purchase was obvious, and stemmed off of the tier-one Talent, *Macroenchantments*.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Building Enchantment I** for 10 Talent Points. You can now enchant buildings. You can create impregnable fortresses or desert homes that generate water. This Talent allows you to make the desolate bountiful and the impossible commonplace. Increase this Talent to build grander projects with stronger effects.*

*You have: **110 Talent Points** remaining.*

The fog on his Profession page pulled away a bit and revealed two new Talent spheres.

Functional Enchantment Size: *Creating a Macroenchantment requires massive investitures of soul stuff. Even then, most Macroenchantments must be enchanted in several stages. The base functional unit for enchanting walls, for instance, is 25 square feet. This can be applied to a 10x5x2 section of wall, or combination of height, width and length totaling 100 cubic feet. Purchasing this Talent increases the functional unit a single enchantment can be applied to 50%. Increase this Talent to boost this bonus. Cost: **25 Talent Points.***

Macroenchantment Modifier: *Creating a Macroenchantment requires massive investitures of soul stuff. Each Macroenchantment has a base*

requirement of 10 times as many soul points as a normal enchantment. A Macroenchantment with the base cost of “3” for instance will cost 30 Enchantment Points per functional unit. Purchasing this Talent decreases the modifier to 9. Increase this Talent to further reduce this cost. Cost: 25 Talent Points.*

Both Talents were geared towards making the cost of macroenchantments more manageable. The first would let him enchant larger functional units, like longer sections of the village walls, at one time. If he was reading it right, the second would decrease the insane amount of soul gems needed to enchant each functional unit. Right now, for instance, his *Briar* enchantment would currently make a 5x5 section of the village wall grow magical thorns, but it cost 4*, the “*” meaning it cost forty Enchantment Points at baseline. *Macroenchantment Modifier* should decrease that cost to thirty-six per section.

To Richter’s surprise and delight, all four of the tier-two Talents leading off of the tier-one Talent, *Macroenchantments*, led to these two spheres. By purchasing just one tier-two Talent, he had revealed this entire section of his Profession page. There were only four tier-one Talents sections left to explore.

This type of discovery was insanely expensive, but the chaos seed just couldn’t allow for the possibility that there was an amazing Talent hidden

just out of view. He wasn't ready to invest in either of the tier-three Talents he had just revealed in the *Macroenchantment* section so he chose a Talent in *Increase Enchantment Strength* section that would reveal more of the tree.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Common Materials I** for 20 Talent Points.*

When creating items, materials you enspell now have their Enchantment coefficient increased by +25%. This does not supply more Enchantment slots, but materials that would normally be corrupted or explode when subjected to strong enchantments can now tolerate these powerful forces.

Enchantments are now more likely to take hold as well. This also allows for less rare materials to be used successfully when creating items. Increase this Talent to be able to make enchanted items from less rare materials.

*You have: **90 Talent Points** remaining.*

Richter had been thinking about this enchantment ever since he gained his Unconventional Materials subskill. His new potential in Crafting let him substitute materials in known Templates and even made it easier to make new ones. It didn't change the fact that whatever he used only had so much capacity for magic and soul stuff though. Now, he could experiment with new combinations and have a much lower risk of whatever he was working on blowing off his eyebrows. That was worth more than twenty Talent Points in his opinion.

After buying his latest Talent, the fog covering his Talent tree peeled back slightly, showing more of the filament leading off from *Common Materials*, but no new Talent was revealed. In his experience, that meant another Talent had to be purchased first. Richter had planned on another purchase anyway, so he bought the sphere beside it.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Material Potential I** for 20 Talent Points. Enchantment Potential is determined by an item's quality and by the materials used. Materials you enchant with can now withstand a greater amount of Soul Stuff, increasing the Enchantment slots of items you enchant by +25%. Increase this Talent to advance this bonus to 50%.*

*You have: **70 Talent Points** remaining.*

Again, the fog rolled back slightly, but no new Talent was revealed. Something else did happen though that let Richter know he had spent his Talent Points wisely.

*Know This! **Material Potential I** and **Common Material I** are **Synergistic Talents**. By purchasing both, your known Template: **Ring of Health**, has advanced. The maximum Enchantment rank for this item has increased from "1" to "2", which increases the base health provided from +5 to +10. The Item Class of the resultant ring has also increased from **common** to **uncommon**. The potential for other Templates may be also be automatically*

increased. This benefit is for you alone and will not aid others that find the same Template. Advance either Talent to the next rank to possibly advance the capabilities of your Templates again.

His Talent choices had already doubled the effectiveness of the magic rings he was making. That was without him even having successfully used his Unconventional Materials subskill yet. If he found a way to make a stronger material substitute for the copper ring, he might even be able to one day make rings that would give +20 or +30 to health. With his soldiers wearing those... a smile crossed Richter's face... the Mist Village would become a force to be feared!

The "frugal" part of him also realized that he could start selling his rings to his fighters to offset the large amount of wages they had coming at the end of the year. The Townhall had helped the money issue somewhat and the new tax of 5% on wages had gone over without a hitch, just like the building prompt had promised. The taxes only saved him about thirteen gold per fortnight. It was something, but he still needed a bigger way to help his hemorrhaging economy. Cold hard cash wasn't a problem yet, but he wasn't willing to ignore the treasury until it was. Randy's warning about revolt and rebellion if people weren't paid was something that he took very, very seriously.

Selling Rings of Health might be part of the answer. Who wouldn't

give up two to four weeks of pay if it meant increasing their health by 10%? He was really looking forward to sharing the idea with Randy. He was so excited, in fact, that he decided to bounce it off Alma. The dragonling had fallen asleep, but cracked an irritated eye open when he poked her belly.

"Alma... pretend that you're Randolphus. I have an idea I want to bounce off you."

"Master," she said warningly. "I'm sleeping."

"Come on," he told her with a grin. "It will be fun, and it will let you practice your new voice."

Grumbling to herself, and silently promising retribution, she stood up and glared at him.

Undaunted Richter said, "Hey Randy, I'm thinking of selling Rings of Health to my soldiers. I think they'd happily give up two to four weeks of pay if it increased their health by 10%."

She just kept looking at him nonplussed.

"Alma?" he prompted her.

In a slightly gentle voice, the dragonling said, "I am not Alma. I am your chamberlain, Randolphus."

He chuckled to himself, "Then why didn't you answer?"

“I was trying to think of the best way to tell you that it was a horrible idea without running the risk of you chopping my head off.”

Richter frowned, “I would never-”

“We all know that you like to poke beautiful dragonlings while they are sleeping. If you are enough of a monster to do that, why would you stop at cold-blooded murder?”

The chaos seed sighed. “Very funny.”

The dragonling continued undaunted, primly walking around the bed now, “Back to your question though, my lord. I look forward to your many talks with the widows and orphans of your slain guards.” Now her voice changed slightly and he realized that she was imitating *him*!

““No. Daddy will not be coming home any more, young child. He would still be alive, but all I care about is gold. Since he wouldn’t pay me I sent him into a dragon’s den without the enchanted items that would have saved his life’.”

“Alma,” he said with a note of warning, but the dragonling was into it now. She stood up on her back legs and started moving her front paws up and down. “What are you doing?” he asked in confusion.

She looked at him as if he were the dumbest man in the world. Her voice also made it clear that it should be obvious, “I am shuffling my

papers.”

Richter laughed at that, “Okay, that is pretty funny. Seriously though, wha-”

Alma interrupted him again using her Randy voice, “I have thought more about it, my lord, and have changed my mind. Selling rings is an excellent idea. In fact, why stop at magic rings? You could sell them their armor and weapons as well.” Richter opened his mouth, but she didn’t give him a chance to speak, “Better yet, Lord Gyoti, you can save even more money by charging for provisions. Simply starve anyone that cannot afford to pay for a meal.”

She put one paw to her draconian face as if she was stroking her beard, “Then there are tents... blankets... just imagine the opportunities for profit! If you sent your soldiers into battle naked, just once, I promise they would pay whatever you ask in the future. Excellent, excellent idea, Lord Poopy Pants!”

Richter glared at her, “You’re kind of being a dick, Alma.”

“Who is Alma?” she asked in confusion. “I am your fish-faced chamberlain. I am only trying to help. If I was your familiar Alma, I wouldn’t have given you this wonderful counsel. I would have said something like ‘If you poke my belly again, master, I will bite you in your

sleep.’ Now can your chamberlain be of any more service?”

“No,” he replied sourly. “That will be all.”

She smiled to herself and lay back down in her previous spot, promptly closing her eyes. A moment later, she sleepily projected to him, **Though you didn’t ask me, I personally think it’s a great idea, master.**

Richter glared at her a few seconds longer, but then he couldn’t help himself. Chuckling, he scratched her neck ridge and she let out a happy rumbling grumble. He went back to his Talent tree. As happy as he was at having evolved his Template, buying *Material Potential I* hadn’t revealed a new blue sphere. Sighing because he really hadn’t planned on buying this next sphere, he spent the TPs anyway.

*You have purchased the Talent: **Alter Enchantment I** for 30 Talent Points. You may now alter existing enchantments. This carries the risk of destroying the existing enchantment, item or both. Purchase further ranks to increase the success of alteration and to allow for greater changes.*

*You have: **40 Talent Points** remaining.*

Even though he hadn’t planned to buy it yet, Richter couldn’t wait to try this one out. He definitely planned to be wearing full armor before he did though. People could call him sissy if they wanted, but an exploding item filled with soul stuff was not his idea of a good time. Especially seeing as

how right at that current moment, all he was wearing was a slightly scratchy blanket. That just wasn't enough protection for his boys!

There was also something fascinating happening on his Profession screen. The fog rolled back and a new Talent was finally revealed. It not only had the three tier-three Talents he'd just bought leading to it, but also the filament that led off from the tier-two Talent, *Increase Armor Enchantment I*. That meant this one Talent had required that he purchase four other spheres first! Put another way, he'd had to spend nearly a hundred TPs to unlock it. Most people gained only ten Talent Points per level. When he read the details of the newly exposed Talent though, he immediately knew why it had required so much.

*Congratulations! You have revealed the Talent: **Scalable Enchantments**. Purchasing this Talent allows you to make enchantments that can grow stronger over time. To add this capability to an enchantment, an additional **brilliant** level soul must be expended during enchanting. The nature of the scalable benefit and the requirements to level the enchanted item will be based upon the unique nature of the **brilliant** soul. This can greatly affect the overall nature of the enchantment as well. Purchasing further ranks allows greater refinement of both the bonus and leveling requirements. It also allows for higher level souls to be used. Cost: **100 Talent Points**.*

Shit! He'd finally found it! Having his new sword was awesome,

even if it hadn't leveled during the last battle. The sword was called Black Ice, it did that cool dimming thing when it was first unsheathed... it was seriously boss. The best thing about it though was that it was scalable. It would grow stronger over time. It only had that ability though because Krom had fused the darkstone blade with the *rare* hilt. Richter had no idea how to make another hilt like that, and if he did, it had been made out of demon bones. Those weren't exactly lying around for the taking.

This new Talent though would let him make *all* of his enchantments levelable! The potential was mind-blowing. If he could equip his troops with scalable maces and swords, then not only would they get stronger from battling and leveling, but their gear would grow with them.

Of course, that was a bit of a pipedream if each scalable enchantment required an extra *brilliant* level soul. Those only came from truly terrifying monsters like the dark aberration. Suffice it to say, *brilliant* souls weren't growing on trees. He had only obtained three the whole time he'd been in The Land, but even a few enchantments like that could turn the tide of battle. This was exactly why he had spent his Talent Points, in the hope of finding a game-changing Talent. Still, he had never thought he'd find something as awesome as *Scalable Enchantments*!

Richter was itching to buy it immediately, but it cost a full hundred Talent Points. He completely understood why it was so expensive, and also

why he'd needed to buy four other Talents just to reveal it, but the high price was still a bit of a scrot flick when he'd been hoping to go all the way. For a moment he was tempted to use his Specialist *Point Conversion* Talent, but that would mean another pretty serious penalty to the experience he earned. Richter had a feeling that the upcoming battle would either mean the end of him, or it would gain him enough XP to catapult him to new heights.

Richter had forty Talent Points left, and he decided to just hold onto them. He had more notifications to review.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill level 18 in **Enhanced Imbue Arrow**. Baseline mana flow of 20 mana:1 second increased by +180%. Baseline damage of 5 mana:1 damage has increased by 90%.*

*Congratulations! You have reached subskill level 9 in **Focus**. Max zoom increased to 190%.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 2, 3 and 4 in **Swordsmanship**. +8% Damage and +8% Attack Speed when using a sword.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 11 and 12 in **Cloud Running**. +3.0 seconds of aerial glide time. +24% strength from jumps.*

Those skill increases were useful, especially the boost to his Cloud Running, but it was his Blood magic that had leaped forward.

*Congratulations, **Sanguimancer**! You have pushed past the limits of your*

magic. You have swum through oceans of blood. Even more astonishing is the fact that you have emerged with your mind intact; surely your familiar is to be thanked for that rare occurrence! Despite your good fortune, never forget that the pathways of power cannot be walked without leaving a trail. Be warned, continuing to push past your limits will draw attention you may not be prepared to receive. In the now, your exertions will be rewarded, however.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 14, 15, ..., 19 in **Blood Magic**. New spells are now available.*

One battle had gotten him the lion's share of the way to becoming an *apprentice* in a Deeper Magic! The Bloodstone had gifted him with three spells after the raid on the goblin village, but so far, he'd only been able to meet the requirements of *Blood Mana*. Hopefully, he'd soon progress enough in the magic that he'd unlock *Sanguine Protection* and *Dread Harvest* as well. For now, he was more than pleased with how his increase in skill level would make *Blood Mana* more efficient. Seeing the increase in his power, Richter already knew that despite the battered state of his body, despite the danger of losing his mind, and even despite the threat to his friends, he wanted more power. He would use his Blood magic again. For him, the only way was forward.

As he thought about that, a cough racked his body and he hacked up a

wad of old congealed blood. Looking at the disgusting gob, he amended his previous statement. The only way was forward... in a few days. Richter moved on to the next prompt and saw it wasn't only his skill in Blood Magic that had leaped forward.

*Congratulations! You have Tamed a creature that is more than **10x** your current skill level in Beast Bonding! This awe-inspiring feat has greatly advanced your skill level in **Beast Bonding**.*

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 9,10, ..., 25 in **Beast Bonding**. +25% effectiveness to Tame. +25% attack and defense of bonded creatures.*

*You have received 2,500 (base 2,000 \times 1.25) bonus experience for reaching level 10 in the skill: **Beast Bonding**.*

*You have received 5,000 (base 4,000 \times 1.25) bonus experience for reaching level 20 in the skill: **Beast Bonding**.*

*Congratulations! You have advanced from Novice to Initiate in: **Beast Bonding**. You may now tame 2 pets without danger of them turning upon you and you may tame 2 pets at once. You may tame up to **common**-souled creatures. There is now a 1% chance of your tamed creatures adopting a characteristic of their kills. The cooldown of Tame has been reduced from 12 to 10 hours. The required time to permanently Tame a creature has been*

reduced from 6 days for every level to 5 days.

*Congratulations! You have advanced from Initiate to Apprentice in: **Beast Bonding**. You may now tame 4 pets without danger of them turning upon you and you may tame 3 pets at once. You may tame up to **luminous**-souled creatures. There is now a 2% chance of your tamed creatures adopting a characteristic of their kills. The cooldown of Tame has been reduced from 10 to 8 hours. The required time to permanently Tame a creature has been reduced from 5 days for every level to 4 days.*

*Know This! As an Apprentice in Beast Bonding, you will now be given a specialization of the type of monster with which you are most familiar. Your specialization is: **Reptiles**.*

*Know This! **Tame** is now much more effective in regard to Reptiles. The total bonus to taming Reptiles is:*

*Dragonkin, Level 2 = **+20** skill levels when taming reptiles*

*Psi Bond level 7 = **+14** skill levels when taming reptiles*

*Reptile Specialization = **+5** skill levels when taming reptiles (cumulative with successive ranks)*

*Current Skill level of Beast Bonding is **Level 25**, rank Apprentice. Can Tame up to **luminous** level souls.*

***Effective** skill level of Beast Bonding when taming Reptiles is **level 64**, rank Journeyman. Can Tame up to **special** level reptile souls.*

Something finally made sense to Richter. He availed himself of one of the benefits of having tamed the tovuut mauler. Namely, that he now had full access to its status screen.

Name: Tovuut Mauler

Disposition: Tamed (Blind Rage)

Tovuut Maulers are reptilian creatures capable of basic reasoning, though higher-level thinking is beyond them. Despite this intellectual handicap, they are cunning predators that will stalk prey for days. Maulers are said to take great joy in eating smaller creatures while they can still scream.

Level: 92

Health: 5772

Mana: 75

Stamina: 3608

Strength: 211

Agility: 42

Dexterity: 53

Constitution: 577

Endurance: 360

Intelligence: 7

Wisdom: 3

Charisma: 6

Luck: 15

Special Abilities:

Rage – Increases Strength, Endurance, and Defense by +184%

Regeneration – Restores 23 HP/Min

Pack Leader – Gathers weaker creatures to follow the monster into battle

He hadn't really thought he'd be able to tame the mauler. He'd had no idea exactly how much "juice" the blood crystal would give him, but he had been pretty sure it would still leave him short. He would never admit to anyone, even to Alma, that his only real goal had been to buy his friends time to escape. The knowledge that he had finite lives had changed things, but

even if he only had one, trading his life for that of the men and women that had fought beside him would have been a good deal. He had known when he had placed his glowing red hand on the giant creature that the most likely scenario would be for him to respawn naked above the Great Seal.

Before his recent skill boosts, and thanks to the perks from being Dragonkin and his Psi Bond with Alma, he had had an effective skill level of forty-two in Beast Bonding. When he'd seen that the first dose of blood crystal had increased his Blood magic spellpower by 50%, he'd easily calculated that his effective skill level had jumped to sixty-four.

The way his *Tame* spell worked was that the higher his skill level, the more likely he was to succeed. The higher the level of the monster he was trying to bend to his will, the less likely he would succeed. If his skill level had been twenty and he had been trying to tame a level twenty monster then he'd have had a fifty-fifty chance. A skill level of twenty against a level forty monster dropped his success percentage to 33%.

The point was, he'd only known half of the equation before he'd attempted to tame the mauler. He'd only known his own effective spell level. That was why he'd done the monumentally risky and stupid act of using the second dose of blood crystal. Richter had had no idea what the Labyrinth boss's level was, but after everything Randy had told him about the Labyrinth, and after seeing that not even Hisako could best it, he'd known

that if he was to have any chance of success he would need *more*.

That was why he'd taken the second dose and gained the 100% boost to his Blood magic. That had made him an effective skill level of eighty-four for that single moment in time. Now that he knew the mauler was level ninety-two, he knew exactly how lucky he'd been. There had only been a 48% chance to tame the monster. Only a 48% chance that he would be sent wherever he normally went when he died. Only a 48% chance to find out if this life was the last one he would ever live.

Richter shuddered, thinking about what might have been. His heart beat strongly in his chest, and he just let his emotions wash over him. Excitement, fear, relief, but most of all, triumph. He'd won! That thought and feeling swirled around in his head for long moments. He wasn't one to dwell and worry overly long on things he couldn't change though. He did come to one realization as solid as granite. Investing in Luck was worth it!

Before he could get to the next prompt, the chamberlain came back in with a perfunctory, "Milord." Randolphus sat down again, completely engrossed in his paperwork. Richter shook his head in bemusement and turned his attention back to the rest of his waiting prompts. The Universe had apparently decided to save the best for last as the remaining windows showed him the spoils of successfully defending the Dungeon.



Congratulations Dungeon Master! You have successfully defended your Dungeon. The bodies of the slain invaders have already been consumed. As **Chupacabras** are a type of Beast, they can now be created by the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent.

Richter stopped reading for a second as his lips wrinkled in distaste. He was *not* looking forward to fighting more of those spine-backed bastards. He went back to the notification window. What he read next made up for the fact that his Dungeon had a new and annoying monster.

For successfully defending the Dungeon 1 time, you are awarded **1 Call of the Dungeon**. You may rally the powers of the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent to fight on behalf of your settlement to face **1** threat. The forces of the Dungeon will come to your aid for one day and one day only.

He had just gotten his own Dungeon army! Insanely awesome, even if it was just a one-shot deal. Richter excitedly told Randolphus about it. The chamberlain was annoyingly unexcited. He didn't even look away from his clipboard.

“Ahhh, yes, my lord. Roswan has already told us this. He received

the same prompt.” He kept scribbling at his notes while Richter looked at him sourly. Way to rain on the parade, douche, the chaos seed thought. He went back to the prompts.

Know This! Labyrinth creatures are so steeped in magic that they provide massive infusions of energy if they die in a Dungeon.

Each Labyrinth creature provides **10 Dungeon Points per level**.

The six slain Chupacabras have provided a base **2,280 DPs**.

Total Dungeon Points gained (including Settlement Specialization Bonus: +30%): **2,964 DPs**.

A sound like a hundred people celebrating sounded in Richter’s ears.

YAAAAAHHHHH!

*Truly thou art wise, Richter of the Mist Village! Your choice to follow the path of the Adventurer has allowed your village to advance to Level 2 of your Specialization in less than one week. For this amazing act your settlement will gain a **Rare** bonus.*

Congratulations! You have progressed the **Adventurer Specialization** of your settlement to **Level 2**. Your people are more likely to hear the call of Adventure: “An adventure? That could be interesting!”

Specialization Level: 2

Dungeon Master Bonus:

+20% Attack and Defense while in a Dungeon or the Labyrinth

+20% Chance to find Nodes

+10% Trap Detection while in a Dungeon or the Labyrinth

Settlement Bonus:

+20% Dungeon Points from any source

+20% Dungeon Loot Generation

+10% Dungeon Resource Growth

+5% Ambient Mana Seepage

Leveling Conditions:

Generate 4,188/2,500 Dungeon Points

Add a new Beast to the Dungeon Bestiary

RARE Bonus: 3 FREE Rooms.

Richter was just beginning to smile over that when another prompt appeared right after.

YAAAAHHHHH!

*Such a feat has rarely been done before! In less than one week, you have advanced your settlement to **Level 3** of your Adventurer Specialization. For this amazing act, your settlement will gain an **Epic** bonus.*

Congratulations! You have progressed the **Adventurer Specialization** of your settlement to **Level 3**. Your people are more likely to hear the call of Adventure: “*Adventure? That’s what we do!*”

Specialization Level: 3

Dungeon Master Bonus:

+30% Attack and Defense while in a Dungeon or the Labyrinth

+30% Chance to find Nodes

+20% Trap Detection while in a Dungeon or the Labyrinth

+10% Movement and Attack Speed while in a Dungeon or the Labyrinth

Settlement Bonus:

+30% Dungeon Points from any source

+30% Dungeon Loot Generation

+20% Dungeon Resource Growth

+10% Ambient Mana Seepage

+5% Ambient Mana Refinement

Leveling Conditions:

Generate 4,188/5,000 Dungeon Points

Add 0/3 new Beasts to the Dungeon Bestiary

Add 0/1 new Rooms

EPIC Bonus: A Master Node

Richter immediately shared the information with Randolphus. This time, the reaction was what the chaos seed had originally been hoping for. The chamberlain dropped his papers in shock and asked his liege to read him the prompts line by line. After Richter fucked with him a few times, “Are you sure you want to know? You didn’t seem interested in my earlier news. I mean, you’re a busy man. Are you suurreee?” He then shared the information as requested.

Upon hearing of the free Rooms, Randolphus blurted, actually blurted, out a suggestion, “Create a Treasury!”

Richter looked at him with surprised eyes and a bemused smile.

“I mean... I wholeheartedly suggest that you create a Treasury, my lord.” As proof that he was learning Richter’s personality, Randolphus didn’t

wait to elaborate. “A Treasury is more than just a secure place to store wealth, though it is that as well. You can set a tax on any collected Dungeon Loot and Resources that will automatically be deducted and placed there. You can even ensure that specific types of Loot are always taken and the Adventurer will instead be awarded the coin equivalent, as long as the hard currency is available. That shouldn’t be a problem if you have a Treasury, however. You will never have to worry about anyone stealing from you again.” The chamberlain smiled, “That will be especially important given the *epic* bonus.”

“Alright. A Treasury sounds pretty boss, but what is a ‘Master Node’?” Richter asked quizzically.

“It is proof that you are truly blessed by the banished god of Luck,” Randolphus responded, looking at Richter in wonder and shaking his head.

“Oh kay,” Richter said slowly.

His Companion gave a short laugh, “I am sorry, my lord, but you just seem to accumulate the impossible. Only the greatest Kingdoms have a Place of Power with a Dungeon and a Core Building. You, in this small mountain village, have managed to gain that and another Core building besides. Banished gods, you have a Bloodstone powering your Dungeon! I have not even mentioned the Quickening, which is, quite frankly, a living miracle.

“I heard Lady Hisako surmising earlier that by your very chaotic nature you seem to cause events of great importance to occur. It is clear that the effect you have on the world around you does not only apply to the inanimate. The fact that you have turned the wood sprites into staunch allies is something the kings of Yves failed to do for centuries. I thought there might have been some truth to the Hearth Mother’s theory before. Now I have no doubt.”

Randolphus examined Richter for several seconds, “I know that patience is not one of your virtues, my lord, so I will not delay any longer in answering your earlier question. A Master Node can be thought of as a crossroads. I have told you that the transport spheres, or Nodes, found in Dungeons and Labyrinths can allow for instantaneous travel for someone who has personally touched several in sequence. This string of transport spheres is called a Node Road. Many such paths traverse the Labyrinth.

“A Master Node is a convergence point of Node Roads. Roads that are nearby will begin to shift and bend to lead to your Dungeon. As such, the pathways of the Labyrinth will start to lead other monsters and Adventurers here. It will also start to funnel Labyrinthine energy and mana towards this spot. That will make your own Dungeon grow faster as the energy is converted into Dungeon Points. It will most likely happen slowly at first, but then, faster and faster as more monsters, Adventurers, Labyrinth energy and

Node Roads converge on the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent.”

“So that means-”

“The Mist Village is about to rejoin the world,” the chamberlain interrupted, nodding. “It also means-”

“We need to make the Dungeon stronger,” Richter finished with some urgency. His mind was already thinking about the Adventurers that might try to steal the Bloodstone and the monsters that might try to destroy the Dungeon’s infrastructure.

“We need to make the Dungeon stronger,” Randolphus repeated, glad that his liege was finally getting it.

CHAPTER 89 – Day 149 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



There were three more prompts. The first was as illuminating as it was disheartening. As he was reading his notifications, Richter had begun to regret the missed opportunity of not having captured any of the monster's souls. Alma had also only been able to *Brain Drain* one of the chupacabras, more's the pity. The battle had just been too frantic. That didn't mean good things hadn't happened though. His Dungeon had benefited from the fight and was no longer level one.

Alas, Dungeon Master! Your Harbinger has been slain!

Rejoice, Dungeon Master! The Chaotic Reptile will be reborn!

A Harbinger is limited only by its own nature and can reach any level, but upon its death, much of its earned experience is lost.

The initial level of the Chaotic Reptile was 20 upon adopting the mantle of Harbinger. Each time your Harbinger is killed, it will be reborn at this

level + the current Dungeon level.

Current Baseline Harbinger level: **23**

Know This! The rebirth of a Harbinger is no small thing. It requires a large number of Dungeon Points determined by the following: **(Harbinger Level x 100)/(Dungeon Level)**

Required Dungeon Points to respawn the Chaotic Reptile: **767**

100% of all Dungeon Points are diverted to respawning the Harbinger upon its death.

Your Harbinger's Resurrection Cost has already been deducted from the Dungeon Point reserve and the influx of Dungeon Points gained from the recent battle.

Minimum Time to respawn Harbinger after Resurrection Cost has been paid: **1 day**

Time remaining until Harbinger respawn: **17 hours 14 minutes 53 seconds**

The counter until respawn continued to count down as he watched it. Dismissing the window, Richter smiled. His old pet would live again! Even though he knew it was loyal to the Dungeon now and not him, it still hurt to remember how the maunder had chopped it into snakey sushi. He read the

prompt again, learning a great deal. The shale adder, he stopped a second and corrected himself, the chaotic reptile, would get stronger as the Dungeon did. The Dungeon also couldn't abide not having its primary creature alive and kicking, so to speak. That meant the death of a Harbinger stopped a Dungeon's growth until it respawned. He could see that info coming in handy.

It also didn't escape his notice that the barrow had gained two levels. Despite the fact that Dungeon Points had been garnished to pay the Harbinger's resurrect cost, killing the Labyrinth monsters had been very lucrative for Roswan's baby!

Congratulations! Your Dungeon has reached Levels 2 and 3. Your Harbinger has grown stronger.

For reaching level 2:

Max Number of Adventurer Teams: 3 teams at once

Dungeon Point Bonus: +2% Dungeon Points generated each day

Harbinger Bonus: Monsters and Traps +11% harder to detect

Item of Power Bonus: +11% Bonus to Monster Health

For reaching level 3:

Max Number of Adventurer Teams: 5 teams at once

Dungeon Point Bonus: +3% Dungeon Points generated each day

Harbinger Bonus: Monsters and Traps +12% harder to detect

Item of Power Bonus: +12% Bonus to Monster Health

Your Dungeon has earned another physical floor.

Mean Level of Dungeon monsters is now:

Floor 1: 8-12

Floor 2: 10-22

Dungeon Experience: 37,049/60,000 until level 4

Richter had been wondering about that. As large as the Dungeon was, it was still effectively all one level that changed elevation. It looked like reaching level three had changed that and had given the Dungeon a new level. In games, lower levels of a dungeon were almost always harder. It seemed the same thing would be true for his barrow.

That might be a good thing, he realized. An easier first level would let his less experienced fighters learn their trade. The chupacabras also might be forced down to the second level. Then again, he was just guessing and maybe none of that was true. Richter supposed he wouldn't know until he went back inside.

The next prompt awaiting his perusal dealt with the Master Node.

Congratulations! The Node connecting your Dungeon to the Labyrinth has become a **Master Node**.

This will lead Adventures and monsters alike to the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent. Energy from the Labyrinth will now start flowing into your Dungeon as well. Each major settlement or Dungeon that is connected by the Node Rode to your Dungeon will increase this flow of energy. The flow will gradually increase over time.

Dungeon Points Generated by Master Node: 17 DP/day

Base Dungeon Points Generated (all sources): 175 DP/day

Dungeon Points Generated (including Settlement Specialization): 245 DP/day

The Dungeon icon in the corner of his vision was flashing slightly, a reminder that he still had to choose his three free Rooms to build. Randy had made a really good argument for a Treasury, but Richter still wanted to discuss it with his Dungeon Keeper first. Not because he thought Roswan would object, but more because he didn't want to see the elf's mustache do the patented "I do not approve" wiggle if Roswan wasn't consulted.

It was just creepy.

Richter sent another runner to bring Roswan to his room as quickly as possible. Then he read the final prompt.

HISSSSS!

During the last battle, two new types of blood were spilled in the **Barrow of the Chaos Serpent**. While both Labyrinth monsters were powerful, the blood of the Labyrinth Chupacabras was only *uncommon*. The blood of the Tovuut Mauler, however, is *rare*.

A new Dungeon Ability has been added: **Regenerate**. The Harbinger, Lair bosses, and other prominent monsters of the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent now regenerate health at a rate of 0.25 HP/level/min.

Other Dungeon Abilities:

Lust: +10% likelihood for lairs to develop. +10% spawn rate for monsters.

Consume: Higher level monsters in your Dungeon have a very small chance to absorb the traits, abilities and/or properties of other creatures they consume. These new monsters can pass their powers on to their offspring or be recreated by the Dungeon.

Richter whistled softly. The Dungeon had been created by supplying the Deeper Magic of Blood and the Higher Energy of Chaos. He had known that it would be strong. Hisako had feared the Dungeon so much that she had wanted to destroy it as soon as it was created. In just eight days though, it had already gained three new abilities that made it much, much stronger.

Those boosts to the Dungeon's power only reflected the Deeper Magic of Blood. Richter was both excited and trepidatious about what would happen when the barrow made manifest its Higher Energy Power of Chaos.

In the meantime, the mauler's blood had earned him a quest update.

Quest Update: The Power of Blood I

Bring the blood of five powerful creatures to your Dungeon to accelerate its evolution. Current Count: 3/5.

Nien's blood had unfortunately not been powerful enough to advance the quest, but even without it he was already halfway done. As nice as the quest progression was, it was the personal addition to his symbiosis boon that he was really interested in. The mauler's blood did not disappoint.

The **Symbiosis Boon** of your Mark of the Adventurer may now access the perk gained from the blood of the Tovvut Mauler: **Leader of the Pack**.

This Boon awards the skill Beast Bonding if you do not already possess it.

It also modifies the skill in the following ways:

+50% Maximum Number of Pets

+10 effective skill levels in Beast Bonding

+10% to level of Tamed Pets

Richter read the window twice just to be sure. He had basically gained the mauler's Pack Leader ability! This Boon was a wet dream for anyone that wanted to Tame monsters. Not only would it increase the number of pets he could safely control, but it also made it way more likely that each time he cast the spell he'd succeed in mastering a creature's will. It wouldn't help for the upcoming battle, but in the future, he could see it becoming his most used Boon.

After everything had been addressed, the chaos seed just laid his head back down on the pillow. He was himself again, but his soul still felt weary from the effects of using such strong Blood magic. He must have dozed, because the next thing he knew, Hisako was shaking his shoulder gently. When he opened his eyes, she was gazing kindly down at him with her smooth yet matronly face.

"Are you well, Lord Richter?" she asked him gently, while resting a

small hand on his cheek.

He gave a small, languid stretch from where he was lying in bed, “I am,” he replied contentedly. “Thank you, Lady Hisako.”

Richter just lay there smiling up at her until her hand pulled away from his cheek, then came speeding back to deliver a head-ringing slap.

“When did you start playing with Shadow magic, you damn gyoti?” Her tone had the sharp crack of a Boston nun... and not in a sexy way.

“Hisako,” Richter cried out in protest. He looked over at Randolphus for support, but his Companion just pursed his lips slightly, shaking his head. Again, he didn’t even look up from his papers, clearly wanting none of what Hisako was dishing out.

“Do not, ‘Hisako’ me! I swear I thought one idiot son was enough, but if you insist on playing with magic you do not understand then I will treat you like a child as well! Do you have any idea how dangerous Shadow magic can be?”

“Actually, yes!” Richter replied indignantly. “I was attacked by a shadow bat.” He sat up in bed so he wouldn’t have to keep looking up at an angry woman that was a foot and a half shorter than him. Even still, his arguing position was seriously undercut by the fact that he was bucka naked under the blanket. He had nothing to be ashamed of down there, of course,

but still, you wanted a bit of protection for your bits when an angry woman was hitting you. Alma squawked in protest at being dislodged from her perch on his chest.

“You were bitten by a Shadow creature?” Hisako screeched, her voice rising two octaves. The Life Master immediately began casting a diagnostic spell upon him.

“Yes,” Richter replied, recognizing the spell form. “But I already cured myself of the *Shadow Sickness* disease.” Alma trilled in protest. Rolling his eyes, he corrected himself, “Alma already cured the *Shadow Sickness* disease.”

The Hearth Mother completely ignored him, finishing her spell. When she was sure he wasn’t infected, she harrumphed, “You are lucky. Both that your familiar shows better sense than her master and that the strain of sickness you were infected with was *common*. If the disease had been of a higher class, her tier-one *Cure Disease* spell would not have worked.” She went on to explain that infections had ranks like most things in The Land: *common, infectious, contagious, aggressive, deadly, resistant, malignant, virulent, insidious, incurable* and *sentient*.

Richter’s eyes grew wide as he heard the last qualifier. A thinking disease? Before he could ask any questions though, Hisako just shook her

head to forestall him, “Do not even ask, Lord Richter. Such a disease is one of the most destructive forces in The Land. What you must remember is that though you are progressing well in your Life magic, you are still only an *initiate*. The Shadow Realm is a dangerous place and almost every creature in it will sicken you with its bite. Shadow bats are among the weakest of the denizens of that dark place. If you are infected with a more powerful disease and not healed, death is not the worst that could befall you. Your alignment could plummet, your soul could sicken, and your body could change until you could not bear the touch of the sun.” She looked at him severely, “You would become *evil*.”

“Those are some of the more benign consequences, and disease is not the only danger of that place. There are creatures that could eat your very soul! Even with your ability to be reborn, you might not come back whole from that. And if you did, you might never truly be yourself again. The soulless...,” she stopped and shuddered, closing her eyes. When she continued, her voice was thick with sincerity, “Better the true death than to be one of those accursed things. Now, I already know that you do not possess the knowledge of any Shadow magic spells, and I assume your ability to Shadow Shift has to do with that ring you’re wearing. Tell me the whole story.”

If Hisako had wanted to scare him, she’d succeeded. Even though the

shadow bat was apparently only a weak monster, it had still done him some serious damage, and Richter was no pushover. He already knew the Shadow realm wasn't to be used lightly, but he had no idea it was as dangerous as she had just made it out to be. He filled her in on how he had gotten the Ring of Shadow from the Death Knight Nien. Despite her warnings though, he told her he still intended to use the ring. It was too powerful to just ignore, "The mauler might have killed us if I hadn't used the Shadow realm to get behind it. It gave me enough time to cast *Tame*."

The Hearth Mother sighed. She hadn't expected Richter to give up a new source of Power. It seemed that her ally could not help but seek more power. Instead of wasting breath on further warnings, she just told gave him information that might keep him alive. "I am sure you have already noticed that time moves slower in the Shadow Realm. You can increase that time by staying in darkness. If you enter the realm in the full light of day, you will find time moving faster than if you do so in the dead of night.

"Also, the only Basic Elements that will work there will be Dark and Light magic. I cannot speak to other types of magic, but remember that even a simple light spell could keep lesser Shadow denizens away from you. Of course, it might enrage and attract stronger monsters of that realm as well. Similarly, Dark magic will answer your call while in the Shadow Realm, but I have heard tales of it strengthening some Shadow creatures. I cannot speak

to this, and you will have to find out for yourself.”

Sighing, she placed a hand on his head and one on his heart, “You have finally advanced far enough to learn a *minor* attack spell of Light. May this serve you well, my ally.” Power coursed down both of her arms and he *knew!*

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: **Minor Sunbeam**. Fires a beam of concentrated sunlight at an enemy doing 25-30 Damage. Chance to cause *Blind* and *Burn*. This is a spell of Light Magic, level 11. Cost: 125 mana. Duration: 1 second. Range: 50 feet. Cast Time: 4 seconds. Cooldown: 5 minutes

Richter blinked, his mind sorting and filing the complex calculations that were always required to cast magic. Years of research and trial and error had just been dumped into his mind all at once. As his mind cleared, he smiled and thanked her. He also took the time to tell her that he had finished the original quest she’d given him in his first days in The Land.

She checked her own interface, before looking at him in surprise, “You waited days to tell me about this?”

“I was busy,” he protested lamely.

Hisako shook her head, but still gave him his quest reward for *Protect the Forest I*.

Congratulations! You have been awarded **5,000** (base 4,000 x 1.25)

Experience Points

Richter thought the next quest in the chain might be coming, but all she said was that they would ‘have to talk’ after the lich had been dealt with. If that wasn’t a trigger for the next link in the chain, he didn’t know what was. He contented himself to wait. After his reward had been dealt with, Hisako very pointedly asked him a question, “She told him she was happy to help, but then asked, “Are there any other quests, objects or magics you would like to tell me about?”

Answers immediately starting shooting through Richter’s mind: Ranock Din, the lost royal weapon of a dwarven kingdom; the kobold egg; the *artifact* map that had been hidden in the titan steel safe; his ability to make scalable items; the defaced chapel in the Catacombs; the fact that he was going to start raising an undead army; and several other things that he was sure she would want to know about. Even though there were many possible answers, it was a strange facet of male biology that when a woman asked if there was anything she should know, any answer that could

potentially get you in trouble was immediately discarded. There was one thing that he really could use her help on though, “Yes, actually,” he responded animatedly. “Uhhh,” he said, thinking about his nakedness again. “Would you mind waiting outside while I throw some pants on?”

Hisako rolled her eyes, “I am a Life Master and healer, you know. You have nothing I have not seen before.”

Richter sighed heavily then just looked at her. Chuckling slightly, Hisako agreed to wait by the Great Seal. Once the door was closed, Richter hopped out of bed. Randolphus stood as well and helped his lord get dressed, the consummate chamberlain. It was a bit weird having a deadly Spy help him get his clothes on, but when Richter had mentioned it once, Randy had told him the jobs he had had to do for old king of Yves had been much more compromising. The chaos seed had left it at that.

After slipping on his smallclothes, a beige shirt, brown leather pants and his new jumping shoes, he slung his Bag of Holding over his shoulder. Randolphus opened the door and they both walked towards the Great Seal. There were guards stationed throughout this first floor of the Catacombs. Richter ordered them all to leave and wait at the entrance.

They were given instructions to not allow anyone to pass. Then he looked at Randolphus, considering. He wanted to keep the information

regarding what he was about to reveal compartmentalized, and he hadn't forgotten about his latest Companion's *evil* nature. Still, he was trusting the man with a lot more than one item. If Randy wanted, he could disappear into the mists and never return. Richter decided to let him stay.

Hisako had watched the preparations with a bemused look on her face. Curiosity over what her ally was about to reveal kept her from interrupting. The first time he had shown her something of import, it had been a staff, a corrupted weapon that had concealed the chrysalis of a pixie. The end result of that was the return of the other half of her people's souls.

The time after that it had been a Magic Core. The third instance he had revealed those horrid black crystals from the dark aberration. She shuddered just thinking about them. As disgusting as those trapped souls had been, they had also been remarkably rare and noteworthy. She had no doubt that Richter was going to show her something amazing this time as well. When the chaos seed finally reached into his bag and revealed his latest prize though, all she could do was lightly slap a palm to her forehead and mutter, "Gyoti."

In Richter's hand lay cradled the Heart Crystal he had been awarded after the Duel with Nien. A completely clear and flawless crystal, it allowed someone to tap into the very ley lines of The Land. Randolphus stared at the item in shock. Even though he had just commented about how his lord

seemed to attract items and people of power, seeing a Heart Crystal so casually held in Richter's hand rendered him mute. Once again, he reevaluated his liege lord. The man always seemed to have another miracle up his sleeve. It would be wise to never underestimate him.

Richter wasn't aware of any of the chamberlain's internal musings. He was just looking at Hisako, "What?" The Hearth Mother just kept looking at the crystal and lightly shaking her head, "What! I didn't use it at all. In fact, I've been keeping it secret and safe until we could find a private minute to speak!"

The Hearth Mother overcame her initial surprise. She realized Richter was right, and he had indeed shown wisdom in keeping this information compartmentalized, for once. "Tell me how you gained this."

Richter told both of them what he had left out before. That the Death Knight had actually been a Master of his own Place of Power, how they had fought a formal Duel, and how Richter had won with Alma's help. Hisako and Randolphus listened to all of it without interrupting. Both witnesses to the chaos seed's story were skilled manipulators and veteran travelers of the pathways of power. They each filed away the information they gained from his story, especially his previously unknown and extremely dangerous capability to now perform Thought-based attacks.

“When I won the Duel,” Richter continued, “there was a prompt saying I could find a use for the Heart Crystal. Obviously, it could give someone Mastery of wherever this Place of Power is, but do you know anything else that it can do?”

“Oh yes,” Hisako responded, staring at the crystal in his hands. “Place it upon your Great Seal and your question will be answered.”

Shrugging slightly, Richter placed it in the center of the four spirals and the room exploded with color!

CHAPTER 90 – Day 149 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



*Congratulations! You have slain another **Master** and in doing so acquired their **Heart Crystal**. Truly, even predators should fear you! Not only that, you have survived to tell the tale and have brought it back to the center of your Place of Power. To the victor goes the spoils!*

Blue and purple-black light was blazing from the Heart Crystal and all four spirals of the Great Seal had come alive with the colors of their respective Powers. Gold, black, yellow and blue pulsed beneath the light show of the item Richter had placed on the ground.

You have captured the **Heart Crystal of the Shadow Trench**. The former Master of this Crystal had advanced his Place of Power to level two in both Water and Death Power. As one of these Powers is also contained within your own Place of Power, that bonus is doubled. Do you wish to:

Deconstruct the **Level 2 Death Magic Power** and earn **1,500** Settlement

Points?

Deconstruct the **Level 2 Water Magic Power** and earn **3,000** (base 1,500)

Settlement Points?

Deconstruct the **Level 1 Death Magic Power** and earn **500** Settlement Points?

Deconstruct the **Level 1 Water Magic Power** and earn **1,000** (base 500) Settlement Points?

Know This! Deconstructing all levels of this Heart Crystal will cause it to shatter. At some point in the future, in days or centuries, it will reform over the physical center of the Shadow Trench. At that point it can be claimed by anyone who finds it.

Richter looked over at Hisako, across the sea of light. “What-” The words died in his throat. The Hearth Mother was frozen. Even a wisp of hair crossing her face defied gravity by hanging in midair and refusing to fall. He looked to Randolphus, and to his surprise, the man was completely frozen as well. Even a fold of his robe was furled in a way that it should shift and fall in the next second, but it remained as motionless as if it were carved from stone and not woven from cloth.

The prompts flashed in his vision, demanding his attention. One more appeared.

CHOOSE, Lord Richter of the Mist Village.

CHOOSE, Chaos Seed.

CHOOSE, James of Georgia.

This choice will never come again! You will not remember this frozen moment, but it will determine your path. One day will be given for you to use these Powers, but the consequences of this choice will last forever.

CHOOSE!

Richter chose.

The light winked out.

A cracking noise sounded like the sundering of the world.

Time resumed.

Richter blinked.

All was quiet.

“Was something supposed to happen?” Randolphus asked.

Hisako looked at Richter knowingly.

“It did,” Richter said. He was somewhat confused himself, but he knew one thing for sure. “I chose.”

Prompts flooded his vision.

Congratulations! You have siphoned Power from a captured **Heart Crystal**.

You have chosen to deconstruct the **Level 2 Death** and **Water Powers** as well as the **Level 1 Water Power** of the Heart Crystal of the Shadow Trench.

Any claiming ownership of this Heart Crystal will have to unlock these Powers to gain spell bonuses or abilities.

The **Level 1 Death Power** remains intact, and whoever takes Mastery of the crystal shall benefit from the bonus to Death Magic.

Congratulations! You have gained **5,500 Settlement Points**.

Your Level 1 settlement allows you to instantly achieve feats in the following categories: **Buildings, Research, City Mechanics, Resources, Dungeon, and Terrain**.

You have one day to expend these points or they will be lost forever.

Richter's jaw dropped. Did Settlement Points literally let him change the landscape of his village? He asked that very question of Hisako.

“Yes,” she responded with a faint smile. “Settlement Points are extremely difficult to come by, though if you unlock the second level of all your Powers, you will be able to earn them very slowly.”

“I didn’t even know there was a second level of my ley line Powers until I dueled Nien,” Richter commented, shaking his head.

“As I have said before, my ally, you have much to learn. There are a few other ways to earn Settlement Points. You have already come across one of the most profitable, and most rare: taking a Heart Crystal from another Master by force. Choose well how you will advance your settlement, Lord Richter, for I doubt you will be given this opportunity again anytime in the near future.”

Hisako leaned over and picked up the Heart Crystal. It looked exactly the same as before, just a clear jewel that fit into his hand. She handed it to him with parting words, “I believe you have shown wisdom in not completely depleting it, Lord Richter. I do not know the location of this crystal’s Place of Power. I do know, however, that many creatures... man, beast, monster and worse... will fight and kill to obtain this. I do not know of any other way it can directly help you right now, but you may indeed find another use for the Heart Crystal.” She gave a faint laugh, “Perhaps next time you find an item of such importance though, you can ask my advice earlier rather than later.” She smiled and patted him on the cheek before affectionately

murmuring, “Gyoti,” and leaving the room of the Great Seal.

Richter looked at Randolphus, who was still looking confused and expectant.

“We’ve got some things to talk about,” Richter told him before telling him about the prompt.

A few minutes later, Randolphus was almost bouncing with excitement, “I have heard of Settlement Points, of course, my lord, but it has been long since any ruler of Yves has been able to earn any.”

“Why?” Richter asked. “What level of settlement is Yves anyway?”

“Yves is a level five kingdom, but that does not necessarily translate to how many levels of Power have been unlocked in the Place of Power it was built upon. I have never been able to personally examine the Heart Crystal of Law. No ruler of Law would ever trust another with the key to his power, especially not a half-blood relative like myself. Through research, however, I believe that the highest level of its Powers that have been unlocked occurred under the rule of Emorrie the Great. He was able to finish quests to unlock the fourth level of his Air Power.

“That is not currently the case, however. The bonuses to spell power and resistance are hereditary and can be used by the current Master of Law’s Heart Crystal. The new King has a fifty percent bonus to spellpower and

resistance in all four of the Law's Powers: Earth, Air, Fire and Water. The abilities and other bonuses that can come from being Master of a Place of Power, like your Fast Learner or Bounty of Life abilities, must be earned through quests with each new ruler, however. The current king has only performed one such quest to my knowledge. The Mastery of Fire gave him the ability Soul Blaze, which increases the power of his summoned creatures by 30%."

Richter frowned slightly. Doing quests to unlock his powers was not easy, but the benefits were massive. His Life Power had given him the Bounty of Life ability. It meant that the growth of his settlement was increased by 30%. His Air Power ability, Fast Learner, had given him a 30% boost to the advancement of all of his skills. That and his Limitless ability were what had made him so dangerous in just a few months. "Why would anyone forgo the bonuses from their Powers? Why wouldn't they just do the quests?" he asked.

"Decadence," Randolphus replied with a shrug. "The old king had unlocked level one of all of four of his Powers and also the second level of both Fire and Air, but his son would prefer to drink and gamble with his friends." The chamberlain's face turned sour as he thought of his wastrel nephew.

Richter shook his head, not understanding, but then he stopped and

thought about it. To him, every new spell, every new piece of magic, even every new monster he came across thrilled him. The Land was a harsh and barbaric place, but it was also full of wonder. In a very real sense, he was living his dream.

Would he still feel the same way if he had grown up in this world and all of this was commonplace? To the people of The Land, spells were probably just like science. Back on Earth, there were people who could do amazing, MacGyver-type things, because of their knowledge. He'd thought it was cool, but hadn't ever really been motivated to learn most of that himself. There had always been a cool movie to see, or a test to study for, or some friends to get drunk with. And back home, all you really needed to do was watch youtube to get a top-notch education. Quests, on the other hand, were extremely dangerous and could easily get you killed. Factoring all that in, maybe Richter did understand those who were happy just to get by. He imagined that in every world there would be those who would take the easier, safer path in life.

That was a thought for another time though. In the meantime, it was nice to hear that the king of Yves wasn't some powerful badass. Richter wasn't exactly sure the man was an enemy, but it certainly seemed likely that the two of them might need to have words sometime in the future. He turned his attention back to the topic at hand. While he'd been musing Randy had

been peppering him with questions about exactly what they could do with the points. Richter focused back on the Settlement Point prompt. Focusing on each of the categories in turn made more windows appear in his vision.

The first one he looked at was *Buildings*.

You may convert **Settlement Points** into **Building Points** at a **1:5 ratio**.

Simply think of a building and you will be given the cost.

Maximum Building Level allowed: Level 2

The building materials will be based upon the most abundant building resources in the area.

Possible Building Materials: Wood, Stone, and Marbled Quartz.

Base Building cost will be based upon **Wood** construction.

Building with **Stone** increases required Building Points by **1.5x**

Building with **Marbled Quartz** increases required Building Points by **1.75x**

Smiling and not believing it could be this easy, Richter thought of getting a Core building, specifically a Library. A red prompt appeared with a quickness.

*You may not construct a Core building without a **Magic Core**.*

Hmpf, Richter chuckled to himself, didn't think it would be that easy. A Core building wasn't what he really wanted anyway. When he thought of his true desire, he saw that it was expensive, but completely possible. He made a note of how many Settlement Points it would take and set those aside. He still had plenty to play with and planned to use them to the fullest effect!

The next building he thought about was a Barracks, something his people desperately needed.

BARRACKS <i>*Cost is in Building Points</i>		
Level	Cost* for W/S/MQ	Effect
0	112/168/196	1) Can train 1 basic unit at a time (Swordsmen, Bowmen, etc) 2) Provides housing for 10 people (Housing nonfighters here will cause a drop in morale) 3) Training in a Barracks increases acquisition of Martial skills by +5% (cumulative with trainer bonus)
1	252/378/441	1) Can train 2 basic units at a time 2) -10% training time 3) <i>Common</i> unit upgrades available 4) Provides housing for 25 people (Housing nonfighters here will cause a drop in Morale) 5) Training in a Barracks increases acquisition of Martial skills by +10% (cumulative with trainer bonus)

2	610/915/1,068	1) Can train 3 basic units at a time 2) -20% training time 3) <i>Uncommon</i> unit upgrades available 4) Provides housing for 50 people (Housing nonfighters here will cause a drop in Morale) 5) Can train 1 specialized unit at a time. 2 Specialized Units available: Meidon Archers and Pixie Scouts 6) Training in a Barracks increases acquisition of Martial skills by +25% (cumulative with trainer bonus) 7) Can train War Leaders 8) +10% Building Durability
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Richter needed Randy to explain some of what he was reading, but when the chamberlain did, he got even more excited. A Barracks not only gave his people a place to train, but it also let them train as cohesive units, such as a phalanx. Functional groupings of people in The Land often seemed to revolve around five-man teams. It was the max number of people that could fight together without getting penalties to the XP they gained from battle. At least without adding in other factors like having someone with the War Leader skill involved.

A Barracks apparently let those five people mesh into a formal attack squad. A basic unit of trained Spearmen, for instance, would gain combat bonuses after they were trained and could even level their unit to gain further perks. To Richter it sounded like a poor man's war party. Not as effective,

but also not requiring someone with the War Leader skill to be present in a battle.

Randolphus also explained the various upgrades that Barracks-trained units could gain. A group of Swordsmen trained in a level one Barracks might earn a *common* upgrade like +1 to attack or defense. Units trained in a level two Barracks though were eligible for *uncommon* upgrades which could include boosts to martial skills, extra health and other cool perks. *Uncommon* upgrades could even increase his fighters' base affinities in certain skills!

A level two Barracks could also train specialized units that had extra powers. Apparently the meidon sprites qualified, most likely because of their imbued arrow strikes. At least, that was what Randolphus posited. The chamberlain was sure a Barracks-trained unit of meidon sprites would get combat bonuses, though the chamberlain had no idea what they would be. Meidon sprites hadn't even existed in The Land two months prior, after all. Randy was more surprised that pixie scouts were also a possibility as a specialized unit and had no explanation at all for that one. Richter supposed there was only one way to find out, and he wondered if Skath cavalry would one day be listed as a specialized unit.

As if that wasn't enough, the building could also serve as housing for at least some of his army. From the warning about Morale drop, Richter imagined the accommodations wouldn't be super comfy. The Barracks

probably just offered three hots and a cot, but it would still help out with the housing problem. It was the last line of the Barracks window that Richter was really excited about though. A level two Barracks would let the village make more War Leaders! So far, only he and Terrod had the skill. The badges and promotions War Leaders could earn made them deadly in the extreme. If Richter could get even three or four more, he'd feel a lot better about his fighters patrolling the woods around the village.

Choosing to make the Barracks seemed like an obvious "yes." As he made his choice, he realized that in addition to not needing to actually take the time and resources that would be required to build the Barracks in the traditional way, there was another huge advantage to creating it with Settlement Points. Namely, that they just couldn't build a level two Barracks no matter how much time they had because they were lacking a vital piece of the puzzle. No one in the village had the knowledge or the Blueprints required to build a level two building of any type. This would probably be his only chance to get a building like this for the foreseeable future. Richter was about to spend the points, but then a thought occurred to him.

"Randy, the max level of village buildings is one plus the level of the Townhall. What's the max level of the Townhall though?"

Sighing slightly at Richter's insistence on shortening his name, the Spy answered nonetheless, "A settlement center, like the Townhall, has a

max level of the settlement's level plus one.”

Richter smiled. That meant he could get a level two Townhall. Once he did that, the max level of other village buildings would be boosted to level three! Excited about what a level three Barracks might offer, he minimized the current window and thought “Townhall.” The prompt was slightly different, most likely because while he didn’t have a Barracks of any level, he already had a level one Townhall.

Know This! Upgrading an existing building will subtract its current worth in Building Points from the final upgrade cost.

TOWNHALL (GOBLINHOLD)		
Current Level: 1		
Cost (in Building Points) to Upgrade to Level 2:		
Wood: 1,011 / Plain Stone: 1,767 / Marbled Quartz: 2,144		
<i>Effect</i>	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>
Max Building Level	2	3
Diplomacy Points	Max 1000 DP/ Foreign Settlement	Max 2500 DP/ Foreign Settlement
Taxes	1-5% = No Penalty 6-10% = -50% Penalty >10% = Full Penalty	1-10% = No Penalty 11-15% = -50% Penalty >15% = Full Penalty
Morale and Loyalty	+1/day (Max: +1000 Points each)	+2/day (Max: +5000 Points each)

Diplomats and Spies	2 Each (+1 Relationship rank with other settlements)	4 Each (+2 Relationship ranks with other settlements)
Espionage	10 Espionage Points/day Foreign Espionage -10% Effective	20 Espionage Points/day Foreign Espionage -20% Effective
Housing and Storage	Housing for 25 people (<i>Adequate</i> housing Quality) 100 units of storage space	Housing for 50 people (<i>Comfortable</i> housing Quality) 250 units of storage space
Quest Rewards		25 XP/Day
Building Durability		+10% Building Durability
Unrest Suppression (Goblinhold)	5% less likely to Revolt or Plot against you	10% less likely to Revolt or Plot against you
Max Trophies (Goblinhold)	2	5
Fear (Goblinhold)		1% chance for attackers to be struck by <i>Fear</i>

Know This! Creating a Level 2 Townhall will allow you to make custom quests for your people. Creating such quests will allow you to motivate your people in new and interesting ways. At Level 3, your Townhall will also generate 25 XP/day that can be offered as a reward. This XP pool will

accumulate over time allowing for greater rewards to be provided.

BE WARNED! The reward can be set as anything you wish, but if a quest is completed and the reward cannot be paid, there will be MAJOR consequences to village Loyalty, Morale and other city mechanics and dynamics!

After reading the prompt about the Townhall's increased capabilities, Richter had been excited. After he saw that he could start making custom quests though, he knew buying it was a lock. He'd been able to randomly give a quest or two before, but it had always just happened. Now he could *choose* what the quests would be! Not only would it let him start power leveling his people, but it was also an easy way to get them to do things they might otherwise balk at. He just *had* to have the third level building!

At a ratio of five to one, it would cost him four hundred and twenty-nine of his new Settlement Points to upgrade the building to level two, marbled quartz. That was more than the base value of a level one Power from the Heart Crystal, but he knew the Townhall would be worth it. As far as using marbled quartz and not wood, well he believed in building something right the first time. The bugbear attack had seen almost all of the village buildings burned down. If that ever happened again, having buildings made of super dense stone might save more than just infrastructure, it might save lives.

The increase in taxation alone made upgrading the Townhall a smart idea. He was also delighted to see that both the human and the goblin sides of the village were being leveled up. The +10% durability wouldn't hurt either. The possibility of the invaders being struck by *Fear* was also awesome. As there was no other way to advance the building to level two without a Blueprint, Richter felt good about the purchase.

Out of curiosity though, he decided to jog outside first. The chaos seed took off without a word and, after a sigh of exasperation, Randolphus took off after him. When they made it outside, Richter stood upon the hill overlooking his village. The chaos seed announced some of the buildings would be getting upgrades, then he sent a soldier running to the Townhall with orders to clear it out.

A few minutes later, that was done. While they had been waiting, Roswan had joined them. The elf asked why he had been summoned, but Richter just told him to wait with an enigmatic smile. The chaos seed actually *felt* the resultant 'grrrrmm' in his soul that time. It didn't bother him. He was about to do something amazing!

He did have one question for the builder though while the old Townhall was being evacuated.

"If you build something out of wood, can you transition the building

to be made out of stone or marbled quartz later?”

The elf had stroked his mustache, but the final response had been “Rarely.” It was possible in some instances, but normally the entire building would have to be torn down and rebuilt or it would be structurally unsound. No matter what, there was a risk of the building’s bonuses being lost. He had heard about an Engineer Talent that made it much more likely, but he lacked it himself.

That was what Richter had been expecting, but he had to check. If he could purchase wooden buildings, it would save him Settlement points and would be exactly what he’d do if the wood could be replaced with marbled quartz later without losing the building bonuses. That particular cheat wasn’t possible though, so he decided to use top-notch materials from the beginning.

As soon as a soldier jogged back to the catacomb entrance and told them the Townhall was clear, Richter purchased the upgrade. A translucent representation of the village appeared in his vision. An overlay of red lines popped up over the Townhall showing how it would look when he upgraded it.

Would you like to move the **Townhall** to another location before you finish upgrading it for no additional cost? Yes or No?

Richter was more than happy with the position of the building, so he chose “No.”

Would you like to upgrade your **Townhall (Goblinhold), Level 1 (Wooden)** to a **Townhall (Goblinhold), Level 2 (Marbled Quartz)** for **429 Settlement Points**? Yes or No?

One “Yes” was all it took.

Mist rose from the ground, unable to be seen through even by those with immunity to the village’s defensive enchantment. A great cacophony could be heard within, like grinding rock and hammered wood. To everyone’s surprise, a builder gnome shot out of the mists. The man flew through the air and landed in a heap several yards away from the mist-shrouded Townhall. He got up soon after, not having suffered any real injuries. Richter later found out the inquisitive gnome had heard about the upgrade and had decided to see the phenomenon from the inside-out. Randy made sure the gnome got latrine detail for a week after that, but at least they all knew upgrading buildings was a benign practice.

Five minutes later, the mist cleared and the entire village caught sight of their new building. It was a clear amalgam of goblin and human

architecture. White walls of marbled quartz shone in the noonday sun. It was two stories high and a heavy wooden door, banded with metal, was set against the northern side. Small windows were set into the first floor, but they were rectangular and too small for a normal-sized person to fit through. The roof was braced by thick brown beams, but spikes of black wood jutted out from the sides, making the Townhall look like a horned monster.

Total Settlement Points Remaining: 5,071

“Well that was just... awesome!” Richter exclaimed with an excited grin.

“Awesome indeed, my lord,” Randolphus agreed, nodding.

Roswan’s response was a bit more effusive, “What in the name of the mustached god is happening?”

Richter just chuckled and realized he was hungry. Extensive healing depleted the body’s resources. As soon as he mentioned that there might be eggs, the Dungeon Keeper got on board with the plan. The three of them walked towards the feast area. Richter’s people were exclaiming and remarking about the wonder of the newly improved Townhall, and many sent smiles his way. As they walked, Richter thought about building a Barracks again. After seeing how great the Townhall was he was eager to spend more

Settlement Points. When the interface reappeared, he saw that the top part of the window was the same as before but, to his delight, there was now an option to build a level three Barracks. He dismissed the other options and just examined the newest perks!

BARRACKS <i>*Cost is in Building Points</i>		
Level	Cost* for W/S/MQ	Effect
3	1,109/1,664/1,941	1) Can train 4 basic units at a time 2) -30% training time 3) Unusual unit upgrades available 4) Provides housing for 100 people (No drop in Morale for housing nonfighters) 5) Can train 2 specialized units at a time. 2 Specialized Units currently available: Meidon Archers and Pixie Scouts 6) Training in a Barracks increases acquisition of Martial skills by +30% (cumulative with trainer bonus) 7) Can train War Leaders 8) +25% Building Durability 9) This is a Fortified Structure: +20% to Attack and Defense for friendly fighters while in this Building 10) Fighting Spirit of Barracks-trained Units increased by +1 rank

The overlay in Richter's vision showed him what each level of the

Barracks would look like. A “0” level, the type of building that could be constructed without a Blueprint basically just looked like a cleared field with a few weapons stands and training dummies. Level one appeared as a one story central building with an archery target, more training dummies and a few weapon racks. Level two had a small wall surrounding several buildings and more sparring areas. Level three looked like something else entirely.

A fortified compound appeared in Richter’s vision. It was rectangular though almost a square, and had fifteen-foot-high walls. Four large stone buildings dotted the corners as well as lookout towers, with training yards on the inside. A level three Barracks wasn’t just a place to train his army, it was a fallback position if the walls were ever breached. Richter promised himself to buy more Blueprints as soon as possible. The benefits of high level buildings just couldn’t be ignored.

Not only did it increase the number of units that could be trained at once and make the process go faster, but it also gave another fortified position in his village. Perhaps even better, Barracks-trained units had a boost to their Fighting Spirit. Every positive rank they had in it increased the damage his forces dealt in battle. It also made them less likely to break and run or succumb to debuffs like *Fear*. Currently, his village was only rank one in FS, giving them a 5% bonus to the damage they inflicted. His Barracks-trained units would be immediately bumped to a 10% boost!

With a smile on his face, he purchased the Level 3 Barracks.

Total Settlement Points Remaining: 4,683

Once again, a great dome of mist rose from the ground. He'd chosen a position relatively close to the longhouses, so people could retreat into the compound in an emergency. Several minutes later, the mists cleared and the village's newest building appeared. It looked exactly the way he'd seen it in his mind. Right after it appeared, a quest prompt appeared in his vision.

Congratulations! You have finished the Settlement Quest: **Battle Prep I**

You have finally (you were given this quest twice by two different people) created a Barracks. Though it took a great deal of time... you went above and beyond by creating a Level 3 building. The Rewards for doing so will be increased accordingly.

Reward: 5,625 (base 1,500 x 1.25 x 3) Experience Points

Reward: Village Loyalty +45 (base 15 x 3)

More snark, Richter thought. Still, he wasn't complaining. The experience was great and earning that many Loyalty Points was always a cause for celebration. Richter grinned and accessed the next category on the

Settlement Points prompt, *Research*.

Just like the *Buildings* status screen, he found he could exchange Settlement Points for Research Points.

You may convert **Settlement Points** into **Research Points** at a **1:5 ratio**.

You may only research technologies in this manner when you have met the requisite conditions, ie – knowing the preceding technology, etc.

This was much more straightforward. When Richter accessed the *Science* tab of his city screen, he only needed to divide the required Research Points by five. Just out of curiosity, he examined the one branch of advanced tech he had access to.

MIST VILLAGE TECH (TIER 12 from <i>Unknown Tech</i>)		
TECH	COST	DESCRIPTION/REQUIREMENTS
Portals IV	2,302,583	At level three, you are able to build a portal that can be linked to the same number of portals as ley lines in the immediate vicinity. The receiving portals must be built upon ley lines that mirror those upon which the home portal is built. Successful research of Portals IV allows receiving portals to be built upon any type of ley

line.

MIST VILLAGE TECH (TIER 13 from Portals)		
TECH	COST	DESCRIPTION/REQUIREMENTS
Local Portals I	67,956	<p>This tech unlocks the Blueprint for local Portals.</p> <p>Local portals are linked to a home portal and only allow travel between these two points. This ignores the limitation of portals being built a minimum of 50 miles apart. Local portals do not count against the maximum number of portals that can be linked to your home portal. At level one of this tech:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Local portals can be built within a ten-mile radius of the home portal.- One local portal can be created per ley line present.- A traveler can enter the home portal and arrive at the local platform.- Travel is not possible from the local portal back to the home portal.
Pedestal Activation I	32,743	The process of placing and removing an activation

		<p>key to control the workings of a portal can be laborious and time-consuming. The creation of a pedestal key will greatly streamline this process. The creator of the pedestal can assign varying access rights to individuals or allow unrestricted access.</p>
Microportal I	58,311	<p>Learning this tech unlocks the Blueprint for microportals. Microportals are devices that will give instant transport back to the home portal the device is linked with. At level one of this tech:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The maximum distance this device can be used is five hundred miles. - You must be in close proximity to a ley line of the same type that the portal is built upon. - Individuals and objects within five feet of the microportal user can be transported as well.

Richter shook his head. Even if he used all of the Settlement Points, there weren't nearly enough. The *Portals* technology truly was beyond the research capabilities of his village. In fact, rank four of the tech had basically

been beyond the ancient and powerful Tefonim civilization. He closed the *Research* window, but an idea began to tease the back of his mind.

The next category on the Settlement Points page was *City Mechanics*. Mentally clicking it, he saw that it let him affect *Morale*, *Loyalty*, *Health* or *Corruption*. He could give a permanent change to any of the mechanics or a temporary one. The conversion rate improved based on how short-lived the effect would be. Richter couldn't directly affect any City Dynamics like *Productivity*, *Population Growth* or *Crime*, but honestly this tab didn't interest him overly much. The village was already in good shape overall and the new Townhall would give a steady increase to both *Morale* and *Loyalty*.

The *Resources* option, on the other hand, was fascinating!

You may use **Settlement Points** to upgrade the known resources within your domain.

The wording of the prompt caught his attention. Only “known resources” could be altered. It meant there might be hidden treasures all throughout his domain that he didn't know about yet. He had found a small amount of moonstone out in the forest, which had already been completely farmed and turned into ingots. The white metal was being used to make some of the village's strongest weapons, but it was quickly running out.

Having stronger metals might mean the difference between life and death for his people. That made him think about his iron mine. A prompt appeared that was not only interesting, but informative.

*Know This! You can only access information about the **1st level** of your mine. To gain further information, clear the **2nd level** of monsters and obstacles.*

Mist Village Mine (Level 1)		
Purity	Metal Type	Amount
38%	Iron	20.1 Tons

For a moment, Richter just absorbed the information. He had known it was an iron mine, of course, but he'd had no idea what the purity was and just how much ore he had. Seeing as how there were 20.1 tons at 38% purity, that meant there were almost eight tons of iron ingots. Each ton was about nine hundred kilos. Given that a soldier wearing a full suit of chainmail, along with his weapon and shield, weighed in at forty to fifty kilograms... That meant each ton could outfit about twenty of his guards. Gearing up one hundred and sixty would deplete the entire first level. That didn't even take into account sundry items like nails, horseshoes and rivets.

Richter shook his head. This was yet another facet of village life that

he'd just been letting Randy handle. The chaos seed had received a quest weeks ago to venture into the second floor of the mine and clear out the monsters there. Now he understood why. His Place of Power had been trying to let him know about a future problem. He promised himself that he would start clearing his quest log as soon as the lich was dealt with.

Thankfully, metal depletion wasn't a serious issue yet. He now knew just how finite one of the village's major resources truly was now though. If he didn't fulfill the quest, the Forge of Heavens might just run out of raw materials. Maybe there was something he could do right now though, to stretch what they already had.

Richer thought about each number on the iron mine prompt in turn. As he did, he learned that there was no direct conversion of Settlement Points this time. It varied based on what Richter thought about doing. Increasing the purity of the ore would let them pull more metal per piece collected. Increasing it to 50% would cost twelve SPs. Increasing the purity to 60% though, cost thirty-one points, so it had diminishing returns.

Next, he thought about transforming the iron mine into the next strongest metal, orichalum. Weapons made from iron actually removed a point from their base. Steel had no change, while high steel added one point to attack damage. Orichalum added two points. Richter's eyes widened as he saw the cost.

The cost to convert **100%** of your **Iron Mine** into an **Orichalum Mine** is **4,956** Settlement Points. Do you wish to convert your mine? Yes or No?

Richter quickly shut that down. It would cost almost every SP he had, and most of those were already spoken for. He was about to dismiss this idea as a loser, but then he read the prompt again. It had specified “100%.” What if he did less? What if he did just a fraction of a percent?

Know This! The minimum amount of a resource that can be transformed is 1%.

Well that didn’t work, Richter thought, so he tried to convert 1% of the mine.

The cost to convert **1%** of your **Iron Mine** into an **Orichalum Mine** is **29** Settlement Points. Do you wish to convert your mine? Yes or No?

Yes! Richter thought. He quickly summoned to mind every metal he knew. A series of prompts appeared. Some, unfortunately, were a negative red. Even more unfortunately, the first negative prompt was just because he was a bonehead and was moving too fast.

*Cannot convert **Iron Mine** to a **Steel Mine**. Steel is an alloy of iron.*

Richter breathed a heavy sigh at that before going on to the next window.

*Cannot convert **Iron Mine** to a **Glass Mine** or **Darkstone Mine**. Glass and Darkstone are Level 2 metals. The prerequisite metal is required to be present in the mine first.*

*Cannot convert **Iron Mine** to a **Necromium Mine**. Ambient Death energy is insufficient.*

*Cannot convert **Iron Mine** to a **Duranium, Vibranium, Elementum, Thorium, Titan Steel, Mithril or Adamantium Mine**. The ambient mana level of your territory is too low to support such powerful metals.*

*Cannot convert **Iron Mine** to a **Naquadah, Unobtanium, Dilithium or Badassium Mine**. These are nonsense words.*

Again, Richter felt like a simple “No” would have sufficed instead of the snarkiness of the last prompt. It didn’t help that he now knew those prompts only came because it was the Universe reflecting his own assholiness back at him. On the other hand, it was cool to know that Vibranium was real though. That had been a real hail mary. Anyone that thought he wouldn’t totally make a Captain America shield complete with stars and stripes *and* Black Panther armor would be wrong... completely wrong.

The second to last prompt also helped him with a question that had been nagging him. He had heard both Randy and Hisako talking about how Dungeons could increase the ambient mana of the area around them. He hadn't known why that was important. The prompts about advancing the village's Adventurer Specialization had also said something about mana seepage and refinement. Now he understood at least part of the importance of that. Without a high mana level, certain high-level resources couldn't exist. Maybe that was why elementum was referred to as a "fey" metal, and why it wasn't naturally occurring on Richter's plane of existence.

The fact that his domain couldn't support necromium also proved that there would probably be some things that were beyond even how his "Limitless" potential affected his settlement. At least, he thought with a smile, for now. Even with those angry red prompts, Richter was pleased with the prompt that showed up last.

The cost to convert **13%** of your **Iron Mine** into a **Silver, Gold, Platinum, Tin, Osmium, Iridium, Palladium, Rhodium, Orichalum, Moonstone, Quicksilver, Cobalt** and **Ebony Mine** (1% each) is **623 Settlement Points**. Do you wish to convert your mine? Yes or No?

Despite the massive cost, this time Richter chose "Yes." The point

wasn't the small amount of metal they could pull from the mine. The point was to get at least one unit of useable ore that he could feed to the Dungeon. He had a feeling that if the Dungeon started growing these metals, then this initial investment would be a very small price to pay. Richter shook his head. He was really starting to understand how valuable Dungeons were and why wars were fought to obtain them. The chaos seed just wondered how many other benefits he would uncover in the days to come.

Total Settlement Points Remaining: 4,060

There was more Richter wanted to do with his Settlement points, but now that he had so many metals in his mine, he wanted to try for one of the level two metals again. It was the only reason he had added moonstone seeing as how he already had access to that type of ore. His experiment was a partial success.

*Cannot convert **Iron Mine** to a **Glass Mine**. Glass is a Level 2 metal. The prerequisite metal is required to be present in the mine first.*

The cost to convert the **1%** of your **Mine** that is Moonstone into Darkstone is 92 Settlement Points. Do you wish to convert your mine? Yes or No?

The cost was massive. Just converting this one metal into its level two equivalent was almost as much creating three level one metals. Based on how excited Bowdin had been when he'd seen the metal though it would be worth it, especially once an ingot had been mined and fed to the Dungeon.

Total Settlement Points Remaining: 3,968

The next resource Richter thought of was the crystal garden. It would be amazing if it could all be changed into a concentrated crystal. That idea got shot down two seconds later when he saw that it would cost more than seven thousand SPs. Yeah, that made sense, Richter thought to himself. The very cool thing about crystal though, was that, given enough time, it grew.

The cost to convert 1% of your **Crystal Garden** into a **Concentrated Crystal Garden** is 103 Settlement Points. Do you wish to convert your garden? Yes or No?

He chose "Yes" again and told Randolphus to halt all farming of the garden until Sion could inspect it.

Total Settlement Points Remaining: 3,865

There was one other resource that could be upgraded: his quarry, the source of the village's marbled quartz.

Mist Village Quarry	
<i>Stone Type</i>	<i>Amount</i>
Marbled Quartz	2,867 Tons
Limestone	150.5 Tons
Slate	3 Tons
Marble	1.2 Tons

Richter had had no idea the quarry contained four different types of stone. He shared that information with the other R's, but for the first time Randolphus didn't have much to add. Roswan knew a great deal about different types of stone, and told Richter that marbled quartz was one of the best building materials out there. The chamberlain did add that he had heard of magical stones like Fire Agate, Dragonstone and Wizard's Clay. He also pointed out that the Siren Rock that guarded one side of the Dungeon was also a magical stone.

Richter tried to change 1% quarry for each of those, but received red prompts saying the ambient mana wasn't strong enough for three of the four. The Siren Rock could only exist here because it was part of the Dungeon, apparently. He also received a red prompt about Fire Agate saying that it didn't even exist, something he somewhat gleefully shared with Randolphus.

The cultured man's nonplussed stare was all the thanks Richter needed.

Just for fun, Richter thought about changing 1% of the quarry into diamond. The cost was so astronomical he choked on his toast a bit and closed the window. Since only mundane stones were available to him and they already had one of the best, Richter closed the *Resource* tab and went on to the next category on the Settlement Points screen, *Dungeon*. The use of SPs was completely straightforward in this case.

You may convert **Settlement Points** into **Dungeon Points** at a **1:10 ratio**.

There were no other options. Just a straight swap. Richter was tempted for a bit. He would have been lying if he'd said he wasn't excited to get out into the Labyrinth. Even though the mauler and chupacabras had been deadly in the extreme, he couldn't wait to see what adventure and treasure it offered. For a moment he wondered if the village's Specialization was affecting him as well. The quote associated with reaching level three had said "*Adventure is what we do!*" after all. He had learned that the wording of prompts was not idle, and he fully expected his people to start having a more daring attitude in general going forward.

Then again, he'd always loved treasure, so maybe he was just being himself. The point was, after having reached level three in the village's

Adventure Specialty, the Dungeon was making 30% more DPs than before. Every DP could be exchanged for ten Dungeon experience. With the barrow making two hundred and forty-five points each day and being able to funnel half of those into leveling, it would take the better part of a year for it to reach level ten. With the 10:1 conversion, each Settlement Point could buy a full one hundred Dungeon XP and greatly reduce that time.

It was definitely tempting, but based on what Hisako had said, Settlement Points wouldn't be coming his way again anytime soon. Best to use them where they would really count and not just to accelerate something that would happen on its own.

Richter moved on to the last option, *Terrain*.

You may use **Settlement Points** to alter the Terrain of your village. Think about the changes you want in order to know the cost.

Of everything that had been offered, this one seemed the most... magical. He could alter the very landscape of his village! Once again, an overlay of the village appeared in Richter's vision. Thinking about the prompt, he examined it. It was a perfect replica. All it lacked was the people. He could even turn the image so he could examine it from every angle. The first thing he examined was the hill the village was built upon.

Richter thought about the hill getting steeper and the image changed. What had been a gently sloping hill became more of a steep incline.

This change will require **437 Settlement Points**. Do you wish to commit to this change? Yes or No?

Hmmm, Richter thought. Having the village on more of a raised plateau would make defending it a good deal easier. He dismissed the prompt and made the southern face of the hill even steeper. This time, he also added a thirty-foot escarpment to the south and east, leaving only the western slope as a means of easy access to village. The change was massive, and the cost matched.

*This change will require **18,511 Settlement Points** and is beyond your current total.*

It was obviously too drastic and expensive of a transformation, but still Richter was enthralled by how easily defended his village would be with the topography change. So much so that he asked Alma to do him a small favor. The dragonling promptly jumped onto the breakfast table in front of Randolphus and stared into his eyes before the Spy could look away.

“Gah!” the Spy exclaimed before he could help himself. He fixed a slight glare on his liege, “Could you please warn me, or even perhaps ask,

before your familiar connects to my mind? If it is not too much trouble, my lord?”

Richter hid a smile very poorly, “Did you get the image?”

The chamberlain sighed, but answered, “Yes, my lord.”

Randolphus’s face became considering as he contemplated the image in front of him. “It would certainly make the village much more defensible. Is this what you intend to spend the Settlement Points on?”

“Settlement Points?” Roswan asked with a bit of yellow egg in his brown mustache.

Instead of answering, Richter just gave the elf the rest of his bacon, which was apparently answer enough for the Dungeon Keeper who promptly started eating again.

The chaos seed did answer his chamberlain, “No, it’s too expensive, and there are other places I want to use the points. What I was wondering is, could we do this ourselves?”

Randolphus’s eyes widened, “You wish to cut the side off the hill? A distance that spans at least five miles?”

“Yes,” Richter nodded simply. He hadn’t really ever considered altering the landscape around the village in such an extreme way before. Now that he was thinking about it though, he didn’t see any reason why not.

He had always worried that even with the village wall, there was just too much distance to effectively defend the settlement. So far, they had only used a small part of the area inside of the walls for buildings. If he could limit the approaches to the entire village, he'd be as well protected as if the village were at the top of a mountain pass. The massive trench he wanted dug could even be connected to the river, letting the water serve as another barrier against an attacking army. "Can we do it?"

"I do not know," Randolphus replied honestly. "I have never seen a project of that magnitude undertaken."

"Remind me to tell you about the Panama Canal sometime," Richter told him. "Get a mock-up of that image and talk to our new village Builder about this...", he searched for the right word, "public works project. Between myself and Alma's high Wisdom values, summoning hundreds of mist workers every day won't be a problem anymore. They're a resource going to waste at this point. Some even use them to scratch scales," he added with mock heat, staring at Alma.

The dragonling looked back with a draconian version of Richter's own patented 'You might be trying to shame me, but I'm awesome so fuck you' look.

Randolphus completely ignored the interplay between the dragonling

and his liege. Instead, he was just looking slightly pained at the thought of having to speak with Lezli again. The blond gnome was the only person more in love with lists and schedules than he was. Like two schizos, they both thought the other one was buckets of crazy. He nodded his head anyway, “It will be done, my lord.” He put a fresh piece of paper on his clipboard and began sketching while the image was still fresh in his mind. Roswan looked at the parchment with interest.

Changes in terrain were too expensive in Richter’s opinion, but then one more idea occurred to him. Focusing on the image of the village still in his vision, he moved the view. Soon, he was looking down at the Quickening. To his delight, he found he could select it under the *Terrain* option. Unfortunately, his first attempt to alter it was red.

*Advancing the **Quickening** to **Level 3** will require **36,329 Settlement Points** and is beyond your current total.*

His second idea was apparently doable though.

To move the **Quickening** to another area, visualize the new location. The amount of Settlement Points required will be based upon the new location.

Richter didn’t want to move the Quickening, but there were a few changes he had been dying to make to the village’s setup. Before he

committed to anything though, he ran the idea by Roswan. He quickly explained about the two bonuses he'd gotten from progressing the village Specialization, the *epic* one that gave three free Rooms and the *mythic* bonus providing the Master Node. Randolphus chimed in, repeating what he'd said about making the Treasury, and the elf agreed it was a good idea.

"And the other two Rooms?" Roswan asked. "I was thinking we could make a room with wooden racks used to cure bacon. We could also make a silent Room."

"What's a silent Room?" Richter asked.

Roswan fixed him with the patented mustache glare of death, "It is a Room... where people can stand... silently... not talking." A slow and childlike grin grew under the man's stache.

Richter closed his eyes and sighed heavily. He'd walked right into that one. "No. We won't be doing that. This is what I was thinking." He explained the plan that had occurred to him as soon as he'd heard about the Settlement Points. Randolphus was immediately on board, as it solved several problems he'd been worrying about. Even Roswan nodded appreciatively, though he mentioned something about still needing more bacon. Richter was pretty sure that mist workers would soon be hollowing out another Room. A Room that the scent of smoked meat would probably

make quite easy to find.

Talking to Roswan about priorities could come later, the chaos seed decided. Richter made his choices in quick succession and spent the points. First, he accessed the Dungeon interface. The *Rooms* tab was still blinking. Accessing it, he saw the top two slots were filled with descriptions for the Entrance Chamber and Egg Genesis Chamber. He shook his head again at the ridiculous grandiosity of the name. Beneath those two entries were three empty slots with nothing in them. Richter focused on making a Treasury.

An image of a large room lined with smooth, blood-red stone appeared in Richter's mind. He knew it wasn't only stone, however. Somehow, he immediately knew there were layers of metal followed by layers of stone past what he could see. The Treasury was like the smallest nesting doll wrapped in larger boxes of dense materials. The Room, and the protective layers surrounding it, would be buried somewhere under the stone. Each layer of protection would be permeated with the magic of the Dungeon, further strengthening it; the Dungeon would be ready to repair any damage that might occur. There was no door, but in the middle of the ballroom-sized Room was a black spike with a gold ball on top rising from the floor. It was an exact replica of the first Node outside of the Dungeon mouth.

Richter was disappointed at first, thinking there should be shelves, and to his surprise the picture changed to accommodate this idea. He went

through other options, adding chambers off of the central space, each with more stout and lockable doors. Eternally burning lights sprang up along the walls at his thought. Heavy chests appeared: open, empty and waiting to be filled. Each had a heavy lock attached, easily sealed as another line of defense. When Richter tried to add a second floor though, he received a red prompt.

You have exceeded the potential of this Room. Advancing the Room to a higher level may accommodate the desired transformation.

Richter wasn't bothered by the message. Instead he smiled, happy he'd realized that he could get more than just the "base model" of a Treasury. In fact, the name of the Room had changed from "Treasury" to "Multichamber Treasure Vault." He asked both Roswan and Randy if there was a difference, but they shook their heads, indicating that they didn't know. As the list of Room traits next to the picture hadn't changed while he was manipulating the physical layout, that was good enough for Richter.

He tried adding a few more items, traps, guardians, etc, but it all came back with the same red prompt. It wasn't a problem. The Room he was seeing in his mind's eye was exactly what he wanted. He made his choice.

*Congratulations! You have created a new Room: **Multichamber Treasure Vault***



Multichamber Treasure Vault (Level 1)

Provides a near-impregnable, hidden space to store valuables, only accessible by Node.

Provides multiple rooms which can be individually sealed.

Can set a Tax upon any collected Loot or Resources. **Current Tax:** 0% (Max 10%)

Can specify Loot or Resources to be confiscated as soon as they are created with a coin-equivalent left in its place. If sufficient coin is not present in the Treasure Vault then the item will remain.

Current List of confiscated items: None

This is a **SAFE** zone. Aggressive monsters and Dungeon debuffs cannot affect anyone inside this room.

Node Access: Restricted to Dungeon Master Richter and First Meidon Sion

Current Contents: None

Richter couldn't deny that Randy had been right. Even if the only thing the Vault had done was collect chaos fragments it would have been

worth it. The tax on all Loot and Resources was just sauce for the goose. He also liked that it could only be accessed by Node. Richter immediately began fiddling with the controls. The first thing he had done was to give access to Sion, trusting his friend above all others. Next, he brought up the topic of the tax rate again. Admittedly, after learning more about the village finances he was much more comfortable charging anyone that set foot in his Dungeon.

He asked his chamberlain if the man thought maxing out the tax rate at 10% was a good idea. Randolphus's bobblehead impression would have been answer enough, but the chamberlain also stressed that they would also need to apply further taxes to anyone allowed inside. Richter just nodded in agreement and set the tax to the max.

"Can't wait to see how this works," Richter commented.

"I may be able to help in that regard, my lord," Randolphus told him. "After the battle, I reconnoitered the Dungeon while stealthed. Of the six slain chupacabras, four had reliquaries appear over their bodies."

"Reliquaries?"

"Yes, my lord. They are the mechanism by which Dungeon and Labyrinth creatures leave loot behind upon their deaths. In the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent, they appear as a ball of blood. In the Hall of Elemental hunters, they can appear as spheres of flame, ice, lightning or rock."

“Oh,” Richter said. “The loot balls.”

The century old noble sighed in response, “Yes, my lord. The ‘loot balls’. As I was saying, four appeared. Each looks like a four-sided pyramid lined with gold.”

“Why don’t they look like the blood spheres?” Richter asked. “They died in my Dungeon after all.”

“Labyrinth creatures are steeped in a much greater concentration of ambient magic than the beasts of your Dungeon. The particular blend of magic determines the appearance of their reliquary and also the value of the treasure they provide. You can expect to gain rewards much greater than what the barrow offers when you harvest its beasts.”

“Hmmm. I definitely like the extra treasure part. Does the shape of their reliquaries give us some hint as to what part of the Labyrinth the chupacabras came from?”

“It is theoretically possible, my lord. There are entire branches of research devoted to the study of reliquaries.” Randolphus’s face became somewhat long-suffering, “Honestly, I found the entire topic to be exhausting and pedantic when I studied it years ago.”

That one statement was enough to put Richter off the topic for life. If *Randy* thought it was boring... he couldn’t even imagine. He gestured for the

chamberlain to continue.

“As I was saying, my lord, there are reliquaries for you to collect which should allow you to see the immediate effect of your Treasure Vault. I would have never left reliquaries unguarded in the Hall of Elemental Hunters; they would have been stolen by another Adventurer almost immediately. I made sure to leave orders that no one else was to enter the Dungeon until further notice, however. I thought you might like to claim the loot from the monsters yourself. Also, I believe your Luck stat is among the highest in the village.”

“Will that directly affect the loot I get?” Richter asked.

“It has always been believed to be the case. However, as each,” he paused for a moment, “‘loot ball’ can only be opened once, there has never been a way to accurately test the hypothesis. Personally, I do believe that Luck can greatly affect the treasure that is dropped from a reliquary.”

Well, that was something to look forward to, Richter thought. There was another question cycling through his mind though, “Four out of six of the chupacabras dropped loot? We were only averaging about 10% of the beasts dropping treasure before, though I guess that will go up now that I chose the Adventure Specialization for the village.”

“Yet another reason why experienced Adventurers brave the dangers

of the Labyrinth. The high mana concentrations of those monsters make them much more likely to provide treasure upon their deaths.”

Big risk, big reward, Richter thought. Randy had basically told him that that was a rule of the Labyrinth from the beginning. He was looking forward to opening the reliquaries, but he still had one last change to make on the Treasure Vault’s interface. He focused on the restricted items that he wanted confiscated.

The first were any elementum ingots.

Know This! The cost of items is set by the **Bank** closest to your position.

An **Elementum Ingot** has been given the base cost (in standard coin) of **365** gold crowns, **9** silver marks, **5** copper shills and **2** iron bits.

In light of your **Multichamber Treasure Vault’s** tax rate of 10%, the payout to any Adventurer finding an elementum ingot would be **329** Gold Crowns, **3** Silver Marks, **5** Copper Shills, **6** Iron Bits and **8** Wooden Chits

Do you wish to make **Elementum Ingots** a **Confiscated** item?

Wooden chits? Only bankers would make wood into money. Richter thought for a second and realized that’s exactly what had happened on Earth. Putting that idle thought out of his head, he stared at the payout for an ingot

of elementum. This shit wasn't cheap. As expensive as it was though, the prompt raised a buttload of questions. Rather than parse them all out, he just read the notification aloud to Randolphus. The chamberlain immediately began to fill in all the gaps.

“In The Land there are six Banks. These are Core buildings that not only generate great wealth but also regulate, in both small and large ways, every economy upon the planet. It is the Banks that determine the value of each gold, silver and copper coin. They are also responsible for attaching the unmistakable feel of genuine currency and preventing counterfeits from being accepted as legal tender.”

Richter knew what he was talking about. Every coin he found had a “feel.” It was subtle, barely noticeable, but it was there. Even the silver kobold coins had it. “You’re telling me that they stop counterfeits coins from moving around. Why would they do that?”

Randolphus hedged, “The science of banking economics can be quite complex, my lord. I would be happy to explain it to you if you have a genuine interest, but it might be better to just state that controlling wealth offers great power. In the history of The Land, nations have waged war on Banks before. In each case, it was the nations that lost those battles. They were then often forced to borrow funds from the Banks to rebuild their infrastructure, at a significant interest rate.”

Don't fuck with the money, Richter thought. Same in any world.

"Why didn't you suggest that we build a Bank with our last Magic Core if they're so powerful?"

The chamberlain chuckled slightly, "The secret of Bank creation is one of the great mysteries of The Land, my lord. The exact combination of how they are created is either lost to time or jealously guarded by the greatest forces of this world. The only reference I ever found was in a parchment that was almost completely destroyed by age. Even then, it detailed only the best guess of a Scholar who lived twenty thousand years ago. Melancson the Astute stated he had it on good authority that it took no less than *four* Magic Cores to make a single Bank. He made no mention of the other requirements and did not state who this "good authority" was."

"Well, I suppose as excuses go, that's not bad," Richter admitted.

"Where is the closest Bank?"

"That is the Bank of Sound, my lord. It is located south of the River Peninsula and across the Beckoning Sea. You would then have to cross the coastal kingdoms and reach the War Lands, a brutal no man's land dominated by warlord chieftains. In the center of those hundreds of armies and thousands of high level monsters lies a Core building. This is only by report, my lord. Neither I, nor any I have ever met, has actually laid eyes on the Bank."

Not for the first time, Richter thought about how fortunate he was to have awakened in the Forest of Nadria. It definitely had its share of beasts and monsters, but it was nothing like what Randolphus had just described. He wondered for a moment how many chaos seeds had been spawned in such harsh places. What would that do to a person? What kind of person could even survive it?

He shook his head. Another worry for another time. “How are they able to decide the cost of items though? What about factoring in accessibility or supply and demand? A cup of water costs nothing here, but it might be worth quite a bit in a desert.”

“The Bank does not control everything. Neither it, nor the Bank administrators, are omnipotent. Traders can set their individual prices at whatever they wish, of course, and those with coin are willing to buy, barter or refuse to purchase as they have always been. In the case of magical contracts however, the Bank can exert some small influence. The cost determined by one Bank could also be very different from another. They do not always work together and, if reports are to be believed, often plot to harm and undercut one another. You can think of Banks as setting a standard in The Land’s economy, my lord, and yet any and all have the choice to ignore that standard.”

“But I’m guessing very few, if any, ever do,” Richter stated.

Randolphus just shrugged as if to say, ‘this is the way of the world.’

Yet another powerful entity that Richter was just now finding out about. He shook his head for the umpteenth time. Focusing on the prompt hanging in his vision, he chose “Yes” and moved on to the second and more important item: chaotic particles. Another prompt appeared, but with a crucial difference this time.

Know This! The cost of items is set by the **Bank** closest to your position.

A **Chaotic Particle** is an **Unknown Item**!

The **Banking Alliance** have been made aware of a new high-value item appearing in The Land.

No Bank in The Land has set a cost for this item.

Until a Bank can fully evaluate this item you may set the price at whatever you wish.

*Know This! A **Bank** representative will be dispatched to your position.*

*Know This! Your **Necklace of Scry Defense** has shielded your position and you cannot be found by the Banking Alliance.*

*Know This! The 6 Banks of The Land have issued a **Global Quest**.*



You have received a Global Quest: **Attainable Assets I**

A new item, a **Chaotic Particle**, has been discovered and brought to the attention of the Banks of The Land. This high-value item must be brought to a Bank.

Success Conditions: Bring a Chaotic Particle to one of the 6 Banks of The Land

Optional Success Conditions:

Identify the person who first brought the existence of Chaotic Particles to the attention of the Banks

Deliver the person who first brought the existence of Chaotic Particles to the attention of the Banks to 1 of the 6 Banks for questioning

Unique Success Condition for Unknown Agency who triggered this

Quest: Merely remove your Divination Protection within the next seven minutes and the Global Quest will be cancelled. You will gain the full reward. A Bank representative will be dispatched to your position for parlay.

Rewards:

50,000 gold crowns

+25,000 Relationship Points with the specific Bank the Chaotic Particle is

delivered to

+10,000 Relationship Points with the remaining 5 Banks

Further rewards available if the Optional Success Conditions are met

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: This is a Global Quest. Though it can be refused, it will remain open to be accepted again until the primary Success Condition is fulfilled.

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Richter, Randolphus, and every other ruler, guild leader, noble and administrator in The Land received the quest at the same time. The chamberlain looked at Richter with shock and disbelief in his eyes. “My lord?” he said, dragging the word out.

Richter just looked back at him wide-eyed, “Uhhhhhhh...”

CHAPTER 91 – Day 149 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



“Refuse the quest!” Randolphus whispered urgently, darting a glance at Roswan. Thankfully the man had stepped away from the table to get a fourth helping of eggs.

“Refuse it!” the chamberlain repeated louder this time. The panic in his voice was evident.

Richter had already been leaning that way. He just didn’t like the sound of being delivered to a Bank for “questioning.” So, despite the offer of fifty thousand gold, the equivalent of five *million* bucks, he still chose “No” and the prompt disappeared.

“What the fuck was that?” he exclaimed.

“Please explain what just happened, my lord,” Randolphus said, breathing a bit easier now that the quest had been refused. Richter gave him the breakdown of what had occurred. The cascade of windows that had appeared after he’d made the chaotic particles a confiscatable item, the fact

that the Banks now knew there was a new high-value item in The Land, and all ending in the quest that both he and Randolphus had seen somehow.

When Richter finished talking, the chamberlain just had to wonder if his liege would ever stop surprising him. Rubbing his forehead, he said, “I believe the danger has passed, my lord. I would not remove your necklace for the next several days, but as I said, the Banks are not omnipotent. They will not be able to invest resources into finding you forever. The more time that elapses, the more likely that any magical signature you left behind will dissipate.” He sighed heavily. “We are safe, for now.” It seemed like he was reassuring himself as much as Richter.

“How bad could that have been?” Richter asked.

“Do you remember when we looked at your Traveler’s Map and you asked me why the entire northern half of the River Peninsula is simply called The Wilds?”

Richter nodded. Randy had said the entire area, an expanse about half the size of the United States, was a savage place filled with large monsters that had sounded suspiciously like dinosaurs.

“It was not always merely jungle. It was once a great empire, until it went to war with the Banking Alliance.”

“Jesus,” Richter muttered, rubbing his own face. “How did the hell

did some all-powerful global,” he searched for the word, “cabal just find out about me?” He tried not to sound like he was whining, but seriously! Why did this shit keep happening to him?

“The Labyrinth, and by extension every Dungeon that gives entrance to it, spans the entirety of The Land. Some say it even extends to other worlds and dimensions. It is not surprising that the Banks might have magical detections for anyone setting prices in a Dungeon. As dangerous as this could have been, my lord, let it be a warning that you take to heart. The powerful magics you are gathering cannot help but invite challenge. The very existence of this village will make others fear and hate you, if for no other reason than, if they had the same power, they would misuse it. The question is not if you will need to defend our home against powerful enemies, my lord. It is when.”

The chamberlain’s statement was like a bucket of cold water on Richter. He had only been in The Land for five months, but he had been there long enough to learn that “human” nature was ubiquitous across races and planets. There were those who embraced peace and beauty, but also those who wanted nothing more than to control or destroy. When he had founded the village, he had done so with the ideal of protecting the former against the latter. Randolphus’s message didn’t dissuade him from that, it just reaffirmed his will to grow stronger as quickly as possible.

Richter turned his gaze back to the prompt and set the cost of a chaotic particle. One copper for every Chaos Point they provided. At least something good came out of that iris-clenching moment. After that was done, he didn't waste any time creating the next Room. He had to cycle through several options before the image that he wanted came to mind.

First, he thought of a fort, and a square stone building appeared in his mind. It wasn't quite right. Next, he envisioned exactly what he wanted: a fortified building that was flush with the portal that led from the Entrance Chamber into the Dungeon proper. Then he imagined a second section that was just an open courtyard surrounded by walls wide enough to walk upon. A gate led into the main fort and a second on the other side of the courtyard led into the Dungeon. It was perfect!

*Congratulations! You have created a new Room: **Barbican***

Barbican (Level 1)

+10% Bonus Attack and Defense for Defenders assigned to this Room.

Anyone assigned to this Room is exempt from the five-person limit of Dungeon occupancy. Anyone assigned to this Room cannot gain Loot or harvest Resources.

Maximum Defenders: 50

The entire contingent of Defenders can be mobilized without penalty if the Dungeon Master is called upon to defend the Dungeon from outside threats.

Exceeding the Maximum Number of Defenders for more than seven minutes negates bonuses offered by this Room and will cause the gate and doors to open. Defenders will be notified if the maximum number is surpassed.

The first Rooms were done and he couldn't wait to see them, but they were only phase one. He decided to save the third free Room for later seeing as how there was no time limit on the *epic* bonus. He turned to the other two R's at the table. "Gentlemen, I'm going into the Dungeon. You might want to join me because I have a feeling this will be worth seeing," Richter said with a smile.

Roswan looked at him, then back at his plate. The elf deliberately took the last piece of bacon, then piled the eggs on top of it in a long line. With what had to be practiced skill, he picked it up without spilling a morsel and, three bites later, had consumed bacon and eggs bobsled-style. After that, he stood to the respectful gaze of his liege and handed the plate to one of the serving women. A wide smile appeared under his mustache, "That was

delicious,” he told her. “I will be back later. Please give my compliments to the chef. Please and thank you.”

Then he gave a nod to Richter, apparently ready.

The chaos seed shook his head in bemusement. Randolphus was already standing and Alma jumped onto her master’s shoulders. The chaos seed began to cast. Mist rose from the ground, surrounding the four of them. A Node network appeared in Richter’s gaze again, overlaying the Dungeon. This time there were new additions. Five golden dots showed him where he could travel. A series of glowing lines connected each Node, showing his established Node Road.

The first gold spheres were familiar. One was outside of the Dungeon at the snake mouth, the next was in the Entrance Chamber and the third was in the Egg Genesis Chamber. A fourth now appeared deep underground. It was only connected to the Entrance Chamber Node. He knew it was the Multichamber Vault without checking, though the name of the Room appeared next to the gold sphere as well. The fifth was physically situated between the egg Room and the Entrance Chamber.

It was the Barbican, and Richter’s destination, but it was also slightly different than the rest. The golden dot in his mental map was only a quarter the size of the Nodes and there were actually a small cluster of them. That

was because when he'd been cycling through the permutations for defensible Rooms, he'd found a fun option. It was a transport sphere that only worked within his particular Dungeon, something he'd come to think of as a mini-Node.

The benefit of having them was that they would only work for people that the Room's owner considered "friendly." The Dungeon had provided a neat and tidy solution to the problem of enemies being able to teleport right into a fortified Room and thereby bypass the defenses. Any of his people would be able to transport to the Barbican instantly, but even if a stealthed Rogue snuck in before a battle, the Professional wouldn't be able to jump back behind enemy lines later.

Richter had more questions about the mini-Nodes, but not even Randolphus had heard of them before. That had surprised the chaos seed, but not the Spy. Randy had reminded him that the Labyrinth was almost a Universe in and of itself. There might literally be no limit to what it contained and no one could know it completely. So, Richter didn't know if the mini-Nodes were just a function of the Barbican specifically or if they could be applied on a larger scale, but for now, the Mist Village had its own private teleport network.

There was also a sixth Node that wasn't only golden, it was twice as large as the other. Not only was it bigger, but it also shone with an inner

light. It was off to the side, and not in the Dungeon itself. Richter had to assume it was the *epic* gift he'd been given, the Master Node. He couldn't access that one, because the line connecting it to the Dungeon, specifically to the Entrance Node, was grey and lifeless. Hopefully it would come alive once the Dungeon hit level ten and connected to the Labyrinth!

Richter chose his destination. Eight seconds after he had started casting *Dungeon Transport*, the three men appeared in the Barbican. Looking around, he was pleased to see that the fortified Room was just as he had envisioned it in his mind. The air was neither warm or cool, just a pleasant neutral temperature. The Room was made of perfectly fitted marbled quartz, gleaming white with blood red veins running through it, just like the Well of Offering. Wall sconces were placed around the room and he was delighted to see that they also were just as advertised. At a touch, the light they emitted could be increased to an almost blinding level of illumination or extinguished completely. Powered by the Dungeon itself, they would work until the sun burned out, and maybe even afterward, if the Dungeon survived.

Empty weapons racks lined the walls and there was more than enough space for tables, chairs and a few other amenities to be brought in. The room was rectangular and each side had an exit. Set into the left and right walls were two fortified doors. They were wood, banded with metal and were

narrow enough that only one person could pass through at a time.

Richter opened the one on the right and confirmed that it locked on the inside. Any defenders that were being too heavily pressed could lock them against invaders or monsters. Past the door was a windowless room whose walls were comprised entirely of marbled quartz. The room was large enough that it could serve as a small barracks for those assigned to the Barbican. It even had a small bathroom with both a toilet and a sink with running water. The Dungeon magically supplied the agua and then drained it away. Richter had no idea where the sink or toilet water went, and he really didn't care. If the Dungeon could consume bodies whole, it had already eaten its share of feces.

The bathroom was just a nice little addition that he'd been able to tack on make his soldiers' lives a bit easier. It was always a good idea to take care of one's employees. As his granddaddy had told him once, a man could put up with almost anything if he could shit and piss in peace. In the center of the room was a black spike with a small golden ball atop it. It was a mini-Node, yet another security measure that would let trapped defenders leave the Dungeon. Richter checked the door to the left next. As he'd expected, it was a carbon copy of the room on the right, complete with a mini-Node of its own.

The back wall of the room was set flush against the wall of the

Dungeon. In its center was the shimmering energy field that led to the Entrance Chamber and the Well of Offering. There was no door, but the marbled quartz wall was three feet thick. What no one but Richter, and maybe Roswan, knew at this point was that a slab of marbled quartz was suspended above the open doorway.

If needed, a block of stone that was thirty-five and a half inches thick, and weighed exactly 45.63 tons could be dropped into place. Richter didn't think anyone could pass through the portal without his permission, but he was done making stupid assumptions. Maybe a giant wall of stone wouldn't protect his settlement from a high-level Labyrinth monster, but then again, maybe it would.

The far wall had a set of perfectly balanced wooden doors. The exit was twice as large as the doorways leading to the side rooms. Despite the extremely heavy weight of the doors, the otherworldly perfection of the Room's construction let them be opened and closed by a single person with minimal effort. Both doors had cranks that, when turned, would fire bolts into both the wall and the other door, locking them in place.

The outer wall itself was five feet thick, but the doors were recessed from the outside, only being two feet thick. The reason for the discrepancy was that a large block of stone was hidden above that doorway as well, ready to be dropped down to seal this room off from the rest of the Dungeon. The

only other features in the room were two stairways, each in a far corner of the chamber, leading up to the roof.

The Room was perfect in its simplicity. As skilled as Roswan was, the elf could never have made a structure that had such exact balance.

Richter looked at the other two men in pride. Randolphus read his liege's face and gave the expected platitude. There was no sign of Roswan though. A few moments later, the elf walked back into the central chamber from one of the side rooms, wiping excess water off on his pants.

“Grrmm. Nice square room. That toilet can take a punch.”

An unmatched fury rose in Richter for just a second. You did NOT bless another man's bathroom if he hadn't done it himself yet! It just didn't happen. Richter seethed for a few more seconds before finding his woosa again. Different world, different customs... maybe. The chaos seed did give himself a moment to imagine how good it would feel to shave his Dungeon Keeper's mustache. That particular zen-like exercise always helped.

Richter left the main door shut and barred. Instead, he jogged up one of the stairways, the other two men following closely behind. Once up top, they all saw what Richter already knew would be there: battlements. The central chamber they had walked up from and the two side rooms were only half of the Barbican. The other half was a large open courtyard. More

marbled quartz walls enclosed the square space. They were four feet thick and his defenders would be able to patrol the tops of the walls protected by crenelated battlements.

Looking down into the courtyard, it was easy to see that this section only had two exits. One was the large door leading back into the chamber they had just left. Two golden mini-Nodes were set into the walls to either side of the doorway, allowing defenders to immediately escape danger even if the doors to the inner room had already been closed. In the wall leading out to the Dungeon was another perfectly balanced door. Above it, the wall rose higher than any other section. Instead of a slab of marbled quartz, this hid a high steel portcullis that could be dropped down in case of emergency. This would allow defenders to keep killing attacking monsters even as they retreated.

Atop each corner of the square, the walkway widened enough to accommodate small siege engines. If another monster like the mauler ever invaded, they would have to deal with ballista bolts and scorpion fire. There were also spouts pockmarking the walls. Above each spout there was a hole on the inside of the battlement where oil, or any other liquid substance, could be poured to spray over the heads and bodies of invaders.

Richter took a moment to walk to the front of the battlements and look out. There, somehow looking larger than he remembered, stood the

mauler. It looked back at him, their eyes almost level now that Richter was standing atop the Barbican. He could feel its mind continuing to rage against the wall of Blood magic that kept it under his control, but the enchantment would hold for another twenty-two hours. It would be enough.

He asked if his new pet had been any trouble, but Roswan shook his head. The elf said the mauler had just stayed in one position, apparently ordered to do so by Alma after she had knocked him unconscious. The Dungeon beasts had also ignored it now that it was no longer making threatening moves. Richter turned his attention back to his new Room.

It was an extremely strong fortification, but there was something strange about it. The second part of the Room had been designed to allow defenders to kill those inside of the walls as easily as they killed those outside of them.

Randolphus picked up on that almost immediately, “This is an amazing defensive structure, my lord, though I wonder if we might have created something different. I understand the need to protect the village from monsters, especially after the recent attack, but there is no guarantee that even the mauler would have been able to break through the portal. Also, Labyrinth monsters become dependent on the high concentrations of magic found in their home and Dungeons. They would be more likely to simply retreat back into the Labyrinth rather than risk death by leaving the Dungeon and wasting

away due to the lack of ambient mana.”

“I know,” Richter responded with a knowing grin. “And you would be absolutely right if all I was worried about was monsters and Adventurers. That isn’t what this Room is really for though.” With that last statement, he spent the majority of his remaining Settlement Points.

This was the one purchase that was really going to make a difference. It was what he had checked the cost of before he’s spent a single point. This was what would make his village a true power in The Land!

PORTAL		
<i>*Cost in Building Points</i>		
<i>Level</i>	<i>Cost*</i>	<i>Effect</i>
Novice	2,289	<i>Novice</i> level portals must have the sending and receiving portal on the same ley line.
Initiate	5,538	<i>Initiate</i> level portals must have the sending and receiving portal on the same type of ley line. The receiving portal must be <i>initiate</i> or higher if the ley line it is built upon is not the same ley line as the transmitting portal.
Apprentice	14,680	<i>Apprentice</i> level portals must be built upon

		confluences of ley lines and can have multiple exit points. The number of exits is determined by the number of ley lines that the portal is built upon. The receiving portal must be <i>initiate</i> or higher if the ley line it is built upon is not the same ley line as the transmitting portal.
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Would you like to purchase an ***Apprentice Level Portal*** for **2,936** Settlement Points? Yes or No?

It was with great satisfaction that Richter, at long last, brought a portal to the Mist Village.

Total Settlement Points Remaining: 920

The ground of the courtyard shook as if there was an earthquake. The Dungeon monsters that had been sniffing at the walls of the Barbican fled in panic, though the mauler remained motionless. Two large spikes of pale blue stone erupted from the ground. They were two feet thick and appeared wet though no dirt clung to them. At the same time, three more pairs of spikes

shot upward. One pair was blacker than midnight while the other two were a shining gold and pale yellow respectively.

More rocks erupted from the ground, shooting towards the spikes as if they were being drawn by magnets. Emeralds, diamonds, lumps of pure gold and even more precious resources were called forth from the earth. The tear of a basilisk, powdered dragon's tooth, the elemental iron heart of a lava djinn and more were summoned to create this powerful object. Some of the ingredients could have been exchanged for less rare crafting materials, but Richter would only have done that because he lacked these perfect elements. The knowledge he had gained from the Tefonim had included the ideal ingredients to make a portal as well as those that could be substituted. The magic he had just unleashed had no such limitations.

As each new piece was added, the overall structure began to take shape. Archways appeared, connecting the spikes. Soon after a dome came into being, connecting the archways. More and more resources were added. Work that would have taken months now only took seconds. Randolphus watched opened-mouthed and even Roswan's eyes had widened. Richter wouldn't have spent so many Settlement points just for that sight, but it was a nice perk. Minutes passed, and the final items were added: four seventh-tier, *special* level souls, the equivalent of four captured demons... or angels. They were spent all at once, awakening the four sides of the portal. There

was a great flash of light, so bright that the three men watching had to turn away.

And then, it was done.

When Richter looked again, he saw that a square structure stood in the courtyard, twenty feet to a side. The dome that had been there during construction had vanished. Four archways lined the borders of the structure, allowing four portals to be active at once. At the apex of each arc, there was a glowing jewel. Each was a different color that matched one of the four colors of Richter's Place of Power. Right then, the structure looked like a delicate and beautiful open-air gazebo. Anyone could casually stroll across it. He knew that once receiving portals were built, each of the four sides would become alive with energy and would allow instant travel to four other locations built atop ley lines. The Master Node was not the only thing that would be bringing new people to the Mist Village!

As soon as the construction was done, his vision exploded with prompts.

*Congratulations! You have created an **Apprentice Portal**. A building of this stature has not been built in The Land for over a millennia. In any age it would be considered powerful, but now it qualifies as a **Minor Wonder of The Land**!*

Creating a Minor Wonder provides the following general gifts:

+9% Movement Speed for every member of your settlement

+5,000 Relationship Points with any other settlement you connect to via your Apprentice Portal

Richter had had no idea the portal would have additional benefits beyond instant travel, but he would sure as hell take it. His people could move around almost ten percent faster now, and he would get a relationship bonus by connecting his portal to other settlements. Either the Air or Life ley line would be connected to the Hearth Tree, most likely the Life ley line, though that wouldn't change much because they already had over one hundred thousand relationship points and had reached *ally* status. For any settlement he was *neutral* with though, that five thousand point bonus would be enough to advance their relationship five ranks, all the way to *interested*! It would make forming trade treaties way more likely.

All of a sudden, he thought of his fallen enemy. The ghast's disgusting, decaying face appeared in his mind's eye. Richter studied it for a moment, then winked at the image in his mind. Thanks for the Heart Crystal, jagoff.

Just like when he had made Core buildings, the portal gave a boost to Loyalty and Morale. Not as much, but it was still a good bump towards the

next rank.

Know This! Your people cannot help but be impressed that you have created such a monumental structure. Their Morale and Loyalty will change to reflect this.

+200 Morale Points for adding a Minor Wonder to the village

Base: **+1079** x 1.84 (+25% Undeclared x +41% Administrator x +10%

Health x -2% Crime x +10% Vassal State)

Total Morale Points: **+1,985**

+100 Loyalty Points for adding a Minor Wonder to the village

Base: **+2,378** x 1.86 (+25% Undeclared x +41% Administrator x +10%

Health x +10% Vassal State)

Total Loyalty Points: **+4,423**

“You did it, my lord!” Randolphus exclaimed. “You have created a portal!” Then, because the man truly was an economy-conscious chamberlain, as well as a Spy, he added, “You have just saved the village a vast sum of money by using the Settlement Points.”

Richter chuckled. Randy had expressed concern over the portal’s cost, and rightly so. A *novice* level portal required ten pounds of pure gold and that wasn’t even the most expensive component. The inexpensive-slash-cheap version of what they were looking at now would have cost over one

hundred thirty thousand gold in materials alone, the equivalent of almost thirteen million dollars. Put another way, it would have bankrupted the village.

The portal Richter had been planning on having Roswan make would have been level one and would have only been able to connect to a single location. Now, the village could utilize the portal's true potential. That was why it was with supreme satisfaction that Richter responded, "Yes, I have. Now who is up for celebrating with bacon and beer?"

"Grmmm," came Roswan's happy response.

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Richter set Alma loose to hunt in the Dungeon. Except for the Harbinger, there shouldn't be anything in the barrow that she couldn't handle. For himself, he jogged back down the stairs and passed through the Barbican's open doorway. Black Ice was in one hand and his elementum short sword in the other. Randolphus stood next to him, not wearing his elemental armor, but with a heavy dagger in his left hand. Richter had no doubt the Spy could handle a few beasts under level fifteen.

Two tuskers attacked while they walked, but they were easily dispatched. Richter felt like a kid on Christmas when he walked up to the first reliquary. Just like Randolphus had said, it looked like a slowly spinning glass pyramid. The edges were lined in gold and the faces were frosted. For a second, he felt a bit salty that these reliquaries looked so much cooler than his Dungeon's blood balls, but he got over that quick. There was treasure to be claimed! He wished he had another Luck potion to waste, but beggars

can't be choosers.

The first pyramid he touched dropped a large handful of coins as well as a sizeable black gem.

You have found: **26** Gold Crowns, **17** Silver Marks

You have
found:
**Black
Starfire**

Gem Class: Uncommon

Gem Clarity: ???

Carats: ???

Durability: 8/8

Weight: 0.03 kg

There was also a prompt that appeared as soon as the treasure dropped.

Know This! The Barrow of the Chaos Serpent has claimed a tax on your reliquary.

Richter looked at the prompt somewhat sourly. He'd been hoping the tax would work without anyone even knowing. Accessing the vault's interface though didn't let him turn that option off so he would just have to live with it. He turned his attention to his new treasure.

The chaos seed couldn't identify all the jewel's stats, but it would be

going down the Well of Offering anyway in hopes he could get more of them someday. Randolphus had made it clear that the treasure from the chupacabras' reliquaries was being generated by the Labyrinth, so he couldn't expect another such drop unless he taught his Dungeon to make more. Richter still hated throwing money away, but he'd always been one to play the long game. It went into his Bag of Holding for the moment and he moved on the next pyramid.

It dropped a weapon that triggered his identification Talent.

You have found: High Steel Dagger of Glow	Attack: 8-10 Durability: 26/26 Item Class: Uncommon Quality: Well Crafted Weight: 1.2 kg Traits: Will emit a soft glow, illuminating the nearby surroundings
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The dagger wasn't blowing his skirt up, but it was still always nice to have a new enchantment. The next reliquary dropped something considerably more interesting.

You have found: Damage Magicka Poison	Alchemy Class: Unusual Alchemy Level: Suspension Alchemy Strength: Fortified Durability: 8/8
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Weight: 0.2 kg.

Traits: Causes 32-38 points of mana damage/second for 15 seconds

This was something he'd been waiting for, another piece of a very frustrating puzzle. He loved that magic gave him power, but seriously hated that his enemies could use it too. Attacking a caster that knew you were coming was a sure way to a dirt nap. Mage shields had been the bane of his existence in the past. If a few stealthed fighters could sneak up on any casters though, especially with arrows tipped in this poison, they would be able to destroy their enemies' mana before the battle even began. Most magi were as helpless as babes once their MPs were depleted. He couldn't wait to get it to Tabia and the Cauldron.

The last reliquary gave more coins. Something he was always happy to see.

You have found: **35** Gold Crowns, **22** Silver Marks

That one treasure drop had given almost the equivalent of four grand worth of coins. Randolphus had said the Labyrinth creatures would offer better loot, but just that last reliquary had provided literally *thousands* of times more coin than he'd gained from the tuskers. When most workers only

made four silvers every two weeks, or put another way, forty dollars in coin, the lure of Dungeons and the Labyrinth was obvious. One kill in the Labyrinth could be worth years of back-breaking work. Of course, the trick was getting the one kill. These doglike chupacabras had been tough sons of bitches. So to speak.

Richter was about to suggest they walk back to the Barbican when he remembered the secondary purpose of collecting the loot. Telling Randolphus he'd meet him back in the fortified Room, the chaos seed cast *Dungeon Transport*. A moment later he was standing in his new Treasure Vault. He took several experimental breaths; he still didn't get how the room was ventilated, but there was no issue. The chest closest to the Node had what he was looking for.

You have found: **9** Gold Crowns, **4** Silver Marks, **9** Copper Shills and **5** Iron Bits

There were also two small gems, a fire opal and a water agate. He didn't know their stats, but Richter was willing to bet that when you added their value to the excess coin that what was in the chest, it would total exactly what the loot he'd already claimed was worth. His Treasure Vault worked! 10% of the loot he'd claimed had come to the Room. That was more than a

thousand dollars worth of treasure! His worries over the village's economy eased slightly. No proletariat rebellions for *his* village! Richter gave himself a self-five and put another four hundred crowns in the chest, on the off chance an elementum ingot dropped. He didn't want to lose the money, but elementum was worth it. The two gems he kept in his hand.

After doing that, he touched the vault's Node and found himself near the Well of Offering. Roswan and Randolphus were waiting for him. His new jewels went down the hole. Richter then asked the other two men to gather close to him so he could cast *Dungeon Transport*. They shared an amused glance. Instead, they just walked over and placed their hands on the Node built into the wall of the Entrance Room. A moment after that they vanished, traveling via their own Node roads. Shrugging, Richter called for Alma, but she said she was going to keep hunting in the Dungeon and maybe find the entrance to the new floor. He told her happy hunting and placed his hand on the Node as well.

Together, the three men made their way back into the village. After they entered the village gates, Roswan made a beeline for the feast area again, not realizing that Richter had been joking about getting one more helping of bacon. As far as the chaos seed was concerned, the man could eat twenty meals if he wanted to. The battle was tomorrow and Richter planned to do some enchanting and find a way to relax a bit, then get some rest. Once

morning came, he would be leading his people into war again. Some of them would not come back. Today every villager deserved all the joy they could get. No matter how the battle turned out tomorrow, there would be death and sorrow.

Randolphus peeled off as well with a “Good day, my lord” and walked towards his office in the catacombs. Richter kept going, planning to go to the Forge of Heavens. He knew exactly what he was going to do with the last few Settlement Points he had. He was kind of looking forward to Krom’s inevitable cursing when he told him. The day was gorgeous. It was hot and he could tell it might be scorching later. Right at that moment though, the sky was blue and filled with white fluffy clouds and a nice cool wind was blowing down from the northern mountains to balance the rising warmth of the day.

Richter stopped to grab a quick bite in the feast area, and a welcome voice hailed him.

“Lord Richter! How are you on this wonderful day?”

The chaos seed smiled broadly at hearing the voice, “Heman! What’s up, buddy?” The two men shook hands, and Richter was struck yet again with how lucky he was to have found a chaos seed that was a friend and not an enemy. It had to be his high Luck stat.

“Just enjoying the sunshine,” Heman told him. He shook Richter’s hand with a smile, “Where is your little dragon?”

“Technically, she’s a dragonling,” Richter responded with a smile, putting stress on the last part of the word. Heman adopted a fake look of apology and raised his hands in mea culpa. Richter laughed and told him she was hunting in the Dungeon.

“Ah,” Heman exclaimed dramatically, “always the worst when the women in your life leave you... unless it’s the best, right?” He elbowed Richter lightly and the chaos seed laughed again. “Seeing as how you’re alone,” Heman continued, “Do you have time to stop for a bite? Or maybe even to take a fellow chaos seed on a quick hunting trip?” he laughed, already assuming that Richter’s answer would be ‘no.’

Richter stopped and thought about it though. It was definitely a great day, and he had already planned to take some time to relax after he had done some enchanting. The truth was, ever since the battle plan had changed to resemble a surgical strike rather than an all-out invasion, there wasn’t as much need to furiously make more enchanted weapons and armor. Less soldiers involved in the attack meant less equipment was required. That meant there wasn’t any reason he couldn’t fulfill his earlier promise and take Heman hunting now for a few hours. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. He really could use some time to decompress. After the issue

with the Blood magic, it might do him some good.

Richter looked at Heman with a smile, “I already ate, but how about you grab a quick bite and *then* we go hunting?”

The other chaos seed smiled broadly, “Well all right!”

Heman made a small plate for both himself and Richter, saying he hated eating alone. Richter humored him and picked at the food while the other chaos seed started telling a story involving two girls, a cup and a toy train. Richter had to stop him in the middle shouting, “That is a disgusting place to hide a child’s toy!” Ten minutes later, they were at the forge, outfitting Heman with leather armor and weapons.

Krom had some unfortunate news about Richter’s old breastplate. Even with the Forge of Heavens, the damage was so extensive that Krom wasn’t sure he could repair it. Apparently, a bowling ball-sized hole caused by a mauler’s talon piercing it front to back couldn’t just be duct-taped back together. Krom said he would talk to Hisako to see if she could help, but for the moment, all his time was already taken up finishing Richter’s new suit of armor.

That was why, twenty minutes later, Richter was wearing his original sprite chest plate. It didn’t offer as much defense, and he missed the eight points of Strength the enhanced breastplate had provided, but it was still a

solid piece of armor. He also had his elementum short sword and sprite bow, but Black Ice needed to be ‘worked on’ according to Krom. Richter equipped a high steel mace instead and left the forge.

The villager hunters and patrols had already gone out, so Richter felt relatively safe taking Heman out in the woods despite the man’s low level. As most of the patrols had headed to the south today, Richter headed west in hopes that they could find a deer or fox. The gate guards tried to go with them, but Richter waved them back, sure he could handle most anything that was within a mile or two of the village.

The two of them quietly talked about this and that as they moved through the forest. Heman always seemed interested in the other chaos seed’s adventures. In all honesty, Richter enjoyed having someone he could talk to from back home. He could always speak to Sion or Alma, of course, but it felt different talking to someone who understood just what it meant to have been plucked from their home and placed in The Land without warning. It made him almost eager to share. He even recounted most of the details of his recent battle with Nien the Death Knight. Before he knew it, Richter had been talking for an hour, and he felt so much lighter than he had before. He was a bit surprised that he felt comfortable enough to disclose as much info as he had, but there was no denying that it felt good.

Still, when he realized how much time had passed, he suggested that

they should head back to the village, but then, unexpectedly, Heman started to share a story of his own. Without being prompted, he opened up and began to speak about his time in the goblin's captivity. The half-gnome had always been happy when they had spoken before, but now, his voice was haunted. As they continued through the forest, Heman opened up about the beatings, the degradation and the summary executions that had been a part of daily life under the goblins' harsh rule.

“At times, the goblins would throw dead bodies back into the cages. They thought it was funny to not feed us, so the only choice...” his voice trailed off and he stopped walking, overcome with emotion. Richter stopped as well, not sure what to do. A moment later, Heman straightened, and forced a smile onto his face, “I'm sorry, Richter. You have enough on your plate. You're going into battle tomorrow, for god's sake. I shouldn't have brought it up.” He took a sip from his water skin, and looked away, ashamed to make eye contact.

“Don't feel that way, man. I've had my own issues and have needed help to deal with them. Believe me,” he placed a hand on Heman's shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze.

The other chaos seed sighed heavily, but he straightened up. He was clearly forcing cheer into his voice, but he was trying, “Why don't you tell me a little more about your story then, oh wise and venerable Lord Richter!”

He finished what he was saying with a laugh and a flourishing bow, before handing over his water skin without being asked.

Richter accepted it gratefully. His mouth was so dry for some reason! He had already drained the entire water skin he'd brought for himself. After he'd dealt with the desert between his lips, he gave Heman a smile, "You want stories? I've got shorees thatz'll tun yu wyite!"

The other chaos seed looked at Richter's black skin, "Uhhh, okay."

Richter shook his head, "Ay mean, zah will...", he stopped talking, looking extremely confused, "wha hapin ma? What ha-" His body dropped to the ground with a solid thud.

"Ugh, finally!" Heman huffed.

Richter tried to look up to see what the man was talking about, but he couldn't move his neck at all. In fact, he couldn't move his whole body. All that worked was were his facial muscles. That was when he saw a new icon in the corner of his vision. It was in the shape of a man bound with ropes. He knew that icon. It was the paralysis icon! This couldn't be happening. Not again! No! No! No! No! No!

"Nooo," Richter let out with a low moan.

When he had fallen, he'd landed facedown. It was only because his head was at an angle that he could breathe at all. Since he couldn't see

anything except the grass an inch in front of his eyes, he listened as hard as he could. Of all things, he thought he heard the creak of a door open and then close a minute later, something that made no sense out in the middle of the forest. He still couldn't move anything except for his mouth and eyes, but he could hear Heman chanting. Seconds later, he saw a flash of bright light and a heard a *zzzt* sound. He thought the other chaos seed might have used lightning magic on him somehow, but he felt no pain and his health remained the same.

A moment later, Richter felt a hand on one of his shoulders wrenching him up. He was pushed into a sitting position with his back against a tree. Heman's face came into view, but with an ugly expression that Richter had never seen on the man before. He was smiling and his eyes danced with malice, even as he avoided looking directly into Richter's eyes.

"Let's just give you a little more, huh?" Heman sneered. He picked up the water skin Richter had dropped, the skin he had only been pretending to drink from minutes before. Pouring the poisoned water into the Life Master's mouth, he then held Richter's nose and mouth shut.

"Too bad we're out of range of your little dragon, huh? Thank you again for letting me know the limit of your communication range. I'd tell you how annoying it is hearing you gab like an old woman, but it did help. If you hadn't told me, I would have poisoned you half an hour ago just to shut

you up!”

Heman kept Richter’s nose and mouth shut, but also looked around to make sure nothing was sneaking up on them. “You know, I was starting to think I wouldn’t ever get you alone before you left to go fight that undead guy. Honestly, it sounds like he would have killed you anyway, so this really shouldn’t be too much of a problem. I’m just moving up the timetable on your death a bit.” He kept prattling about this and that while he waited until Richter’s air ran out and he was forced to swallow. Richter despaired as he realized Heman was right, both about the stupidity he’d shown in sharing such private information and the fact that Alma was out of range. The Life Master had started calling for her soon after he hit the ground, but there was still no answer. The other psychic connection he had to the tovuut mauler was much weaker and would only work over short distances.

After he swallowed, the paralysis timer increased to four minutes and thirty-eight seconds. Whatever poison Heman had put into the water was potent. Richter kept trying to call for Alma, but there was still no response. His heart beat wildly in panic. He couldn’t be killed because of paralysis poison again!

“Dun do ths,” Richter pleaded, some of the poisoned water leaking out of his mouth. “Dun du thz.” How had he ever trusted this guy? Now he literally couldn’t understand how he had ever felt at ease talking to the other

chaos seed. He knew just how duplicitous his people could be. How could he have been so stupid?

“Sorry,” Heman replied with a smile and a wink, but still careful not to make eye contact with Richter, “but there is no choice. I’m committed, and I’m sure you already feel the enchantment I placed on you fading away. There just isn’t any other choice now. I doubt you’ll still want to be bffs after what I’m about to do to you,” he added with a chuckle. “Before we get to the... messy bits though, I want to show you something. It’s pretty cool if I do say so myself.”

Waggling his eyebrows, he reached a hand out and seemed to grab at thin air. Pulling his arm back though, Richter heard the creaking sound again. To his astonishment, he saw Heman open an invisible door that was hanging in midair. It revealed a three-by-three-foot cubby that looked to be one foot deep. As strange as that was, the fact that it was made of wood and had two small shelves made it even weirder. Heman had basically opened a rent in space and on the inside of that impossibility was something that looked like it had come from Pottery Barn? Richter screamed in confusion and frustration inside the confines of his own mind, though he could only manage a low moan through his mouth! What the fuck was going on?

“I’m sure you’re wondering what’s going on, right?” Heman asked. “Don’t try to answer. It’s actually a bit gross the way you keep drooling on

yourself. Hold on. This will only take a second. Five, to be exact.” He took a large vial out of the cubby. It was filled with a brown liquid that somehow gave off a distinctive grey light. With a sinking feeling, Richter realized just how the other chaos seed must have gotten the potion. There was only one magic he knew of that emitted that color. Chaos.

Heman waggled the vial in front of Richter’s face, “This is how I beat you. This, and a small amount of water, was all it took to take you down,” his voice filled with pomp, “the great and powerful Richter!” Speaking at a normal volume again, but with a hate-filled tone, he concluded, “That was all it took to destroy your arrogant ass.” Heman made a loud snot-dragging noise and hawked a sticky, wet blob onto Richter’s face, still taking care not to meet the other chaos seed’s eyes.

Feeling the gross nastiness on his face filled Richter with rage, but he still remained in the same position he had been placed in, as helpless as a babe. Heman left the spittle to slowly ooze down Richter’s face, leaving a slimy trail behind. When the deceitful chaos seed spoke again, his voice was cheery once more, “Now, we have a little time before I have to go. Let me fill in some of the blanks for you. As you may have guessed... though possibly haven’t, you never did strike me as particularly bright... I have an ability. Two actually, and they work together quite well.

“The first is what let me beat your little truthsayer when she asked me

those questions about my loyalty. It's called False Comfort. Simply put, it sets peoples' minds at ease. They see whatever I need them to see so that they don't consider me a threat. Those little questions you had the sprite ask were very clever," he laughed, "but that spell only tested someone's intent. Since my ability makes others only see the best about me, that wasn't very hard. It even confuses skills like your Analyze. Thank you again for telling me about that, by the way. You really should shut up sometimes, you know. Just food for thought. Where was I? Ah yes, my ability. Admittedly, it might not sound like a very powerful one, but it works oh so well with my other one."

Richter started to try and speak again, but Heman shook his head with a "tut-tut." Then he took off Richter's helmet and slapped the Lord of the Mist Village ringingly across the face. Then did it again and again... and again. Richter's fury burned within him, but he knew threats wouldn't do anything against this monster. Not in his helpless position. All he could try for was reason, "Pees. Peas, yu dun hv tadu ths. We kin be frnds. I can hep yu."

Heman leaned close, "Help me?" he asked in an amused voice. Then one of his hands wrapped around Richter's throat and he pushed on his captive's windpipe. "Help me?" he asked again, louder and with a tone shaking with anger. "You think you are good enough to help me?" he

screamed into Richter's face, specks of spittle flying.

“Who are you to think you can help me? Who are you to think you can be my friend? While you've been aboveground, becoming a lord and enjoying the sunlight, I was buried! I was *eaten* three times until I found the tribe of gnolls. Then I was enslaved, beaten and abused until I could learn their language. Ha! Even that would have come easier for you and your goddamn Gift of Tongues! You were given everything!

“All my ability could do initially was convince them not to eat me. It doesn't work right if people can't understand me. I had to persuade them in other ways. Use nonverbal communication. I had to find a way to touch them for my other ability to work. How do you think I was able to do that, *Lord* Richter? How do you think I survived?” He was screaming the whole time and spittle rained over Richter.

“Do you know what it's like to be violated, sometimes several times in a row, by a tribe of degenerate dog-faced gnolls? The stink, the way their coarse hair felt on my skin? Did you know they find the scent of blood to be sexually arousing? They would rake their claws across my back while they ripped me again and again!” There was an insane light in Heman's eyes as he relived the atrocities that had defined his early existence in The Land.

He looked at Richter again, still careful not to meet his eyes. His

voice was much more calm, but heavy with scorn and condemnation, “Where were you then, my *friend*? Where were you as I slowly learned enough of the gnoll language from the other slaves to take the tribe over? Where were you for the months of violence and pain, when the only times I saw light meant I would be raped and cut again and again and again?”

“No,” Heman whispered to him. “I reject your kind offer of friendship. Instead, I think I’ll just take everything I need from you. Including your life.” The chaos seed stood, “But not yet.”

Throughout Heman’s entire madness-filled rant, Richter had tried to make eye contact. His only hope was to draw the other man into his mindscape and keep him there until the paralysis wore off. He did not succeed, but that didn’t mean his intense stare had no effect. Heman noticed his efforts and understood their significance. The man’s response was swift and brutal.

Drawing the very dagger Richter had given him barely an hour before, he swung the pommel down with crushing force. There was an audible *crunch* and Richter was knocked back down to the earth. His jaw flared with pain and his vision darkened. The pain worsened when his face hit the ground and he couldn’t be sure he didn’t lose consciousness for a few moments. The next thing he knew, a red debuff was flashing in his vision.

*You have suffered a **Fractured Jaw**. You can no longer form words. You can no longer accomplish the verbal component of spell casting.*

When Heman set him upright again, he had the same condescending smile on his face. Tears of impotent rage fell from Richter's eyes. He desperately tried to meet Heman's gaze again, even though he knew the consequences, if only out of spite. If only to prove to this horror of a man that he wouldn't be cowed by pain. Pain had become, if not an old friend, something that he did not fear nearly as much as he once had. Challenge and anger blazed in his eyes.

Heman's response was once again both definitive and brutal. The other chaos seed might have lost control for a few moments, but he was no fool. He had listened well to Richter's tale of his battle with Nien, and would not make the same mistake as Richter's latest vanquished foe.

Instead of meeting Richter's eyes, he raised the dagger again, this time bringing it down with crushing force on Richter's right eye. The orbit fractured inward from that first blow, some bone shards scraping the top of the soft orb. The force of the strike bruised the eye as well. Heman landed two more blows on that side of the helpless chaos seed's face and three more on the left. For good measure, he then bound a strip of cloth around Richter's eyes, but he needn't have bothered. His brutality had already maimed his victim.

*You have suffered bilateral **Orbital Fractures** and bilateral **Ocular Lacerations**. You are **Blind**. The left ocular nerve has been damaged. The pain you are suffering is beyond the capability of most humans to endure. Your enhanced Secondary Attribute, **Resilience**, has preserved your sanity for now, but continuing to endure pain at these levels may cause **Madness**.*

“Well that gentled you down some, didn’t it?” Heman judged, sounding extremely pleased with himself. “This is your own fault. If you hadn’t been bragging for days about how you’re such a badass spellcaster I wouldn’t have had to break your jaw. And if you hadn’t told me you were a dangerous psychic, I wouldn’t have had to take out your eyes. You’re lucky you don’t have any cock magic, huh?” Heman laughed long and hard. His earlier slip into insanity was apparently forgotten.

“You have no idea how *annoying* it has been having to smile at you for the last few days. Seeing that self-righteous look on your smug face, *Lord Richter*. Look at you now. Still looking up at me even though you can’t see. Still pompous.” He huffed in irritation. “You’ll lose that cockiness before the end. I promise you that, boy!”

Richter heard Heman stand up, “I knew without you even telling me that you were from the Western Confederation back on Earth. Weren’t you?” The fact that Richter couldn’t answer anymore didn’t slow his torturer down for a second, “That’s always the problem with you people. All that

holier-than-thou bullshit you've been spewing for the past few days simply reeks of your democratic indoctrination. Who are you to come to this new world and stick your nose in cultures that have been evolving for hundreds of thousands of years? Who are you to decide what is right and what is wrong?"

Richter could barely follow what Heman was saying. The three injuries to his face made his mind feel like it was swirling in a whirlpool of pain. He felt like if he were to go all the way down the drain, only madness waited below. It was almost all he could do to keep "afloat."

Heman didn't care. He just looked around the forest again before continuing, "Where was I? Ah yes, my first ability is quite useful for an introduction, and apparently for fooling truth tests, but my second ability is the one I really love. It's called Forced Friend. When I first woke up in those goddamn tunnels... that part of what I told you was true by the way... I thought I was still playing the game. I tried to access my status screen, of course. Gaming one oh one, right? When it appeared though, it said I was a level one half-gnome, half-human. I thought I'd gotten hacked. You have *no* idea how pissed I was. When I was gaming, I was always an orc or a barbarian lord. I was the leader of one of the largest PK guilds on the Eastern Server!" He had puffed his chest up as he said that, but only held the pose for a moment before laughing in self-deprecation, "As if any of that ever

actually mattered.” He shook his head.

“While I examined my status page, I thought that my second ability, Forced Friend, was the shittiest ability of all time. We didn’t even have a relationship system back in the game. I thought it was a glitch.” He grinned at Richter again, not caring that the other man was now blind.

“I was so wrong! Forced Friend gives me up to thousands Relationship Points a day with anyone I physically touch. Sometimes it’s more and sometimes it’s less, but every time, they like me more. That was why I had to suffer being raped by those dogs day after day. As many horrors as I had to endure, in time I overcame the natural hate they have for humans. After that, they started to like me. Then love me. They still continued to abuse me and use my body until I was able to learn their language, but I did learn it!” he finished triumphantly.

A smile of pure sick perversion bloomed on his face, “After that, after I got revenge on some of the worst rapists in the tribe, I got to start practicing my abilities on the other slaves the gnolls had. I also got to start having sex with people that I wanted to fuck. They weren’t always willing, but after catching for months you can’t blame me for pitching, can you?” The sickness in the man’s laugh penetrated even Richter’s pain-addled mind. It disgusted him, but without any means to communicate, all he could do was continue to listen to the evil man’s diatribe.

“What I found is that it worked better on some races than others.

Their overall attitude and personality can make a difference too. The slaves that still had some fire in them were more resilient while those eager to please grew to like me faster. You know, I was sure that a thirsty little bitch like you would take my whole load every day!” His laugh was derisive and hateful, but he added begrudgingly, “You were able to resist my ability to a certain extent though. I only got up to two and a half thousand Relationship Points with you every day. It was still enough to make you spill your secrets like a girl on prom night, but it was slower than I would have liked. Why is that?

“Do you have some sort of mental or emotional resistance? Do you have a high Wisdom? That would give you a higher magical resistance, but would that protect you from me?” Heman seemed genuinely interested, but then he just shrugged, “You probably wouldn’t be able to tell me even if you could speak. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter. Needless to say, even at reduced levels having a boost to my relationship with you every day added up. Just look what I got you to do after only six days. Come all the way out here, and tell me all your little secrets. I’m pretty sure in twelve days you would have been bending over and calling me daddy. What do you think?”

The pain wasn’t gone, but Richter had mastered it enough for his rage to return. It built up inside of him, just waiting for release.

“No?” Heman asked. “Maybe ‘papi,’ instead? Were you a latin lover back on earth or was your skin always the color of shit?” He sneered again. “It doesn’t matter. As I was saying, I learned more about my abilities and found that the higher my Charisma, the more Relationship Points Forced Friend could earn me. It aggravated me having to waste points in such a soft attribute, but then,” he slapped Richter’s face none too gently, “you invested quite a few points there yourself didn’t you pretty boy?” The pain from those slaps against his ruined face almost made the Enchanter vomit. The other chaos seed smiled brightly, “Let’s up your dose again, shall we? Now this might hurt a bit.”

Heman grabbed Richter’s fractured jaw in a strong grip, the man’s Strength enhanced by months of mining. Richter mewled in pain, and his consciousness devolved into pure agony once again. His tormentor poured more of the poisoned water down his throat, and clamped his nose and mouth shut for a second time. After his air ran out, his swallow reflex triggered and he swallowed more of the immobility potion. The paralysis counter increased by another four minutes.

Tears rolled down Richter’s cheeks, and shame mixed with the rage he was feeling. The fury wasn’t only focused on Heman. It was on himself as well. How could he have let this happen? He had let down his guard. Again!

Alma! he screamed with his mind. **Almaaaa!**

There was still no response.

“What was I saying?” Heman mused, completely unconcerned with the agony he had just caused. “I keep getting distracted when I hurt you, but it’s just so much fun! There I go, getting distracted again!” He chuckled to himself, before holding up a finger in Eureka, “I remember now. I was explaining why we can’t be buddies anymore. The only downside to my abilities is that once I take direct action against you, I lose all the Relationship Points I gained with my Forced Friend Ability and the perception filter from my False Comfort ability fades away. That’s why *our* relationship has gone all the way down to *hatred*. Well, that and the fact that I’ve drugged you and broken your jaw, huh?

“So unfortunately, I’m going to have to say no to your earlier request to ‘not do this.’ Also, your offer of friendship and help, as sweet and unmotivated by self-interest as I am sure they were, will just have to get a big fat ‘no’ from me. Instead, I think I’ll be taking all of your Chaos Points.” Seeing Richter’s eyes widen, Heman chuckled, “So you really haven’t met another chaos seed before, huh? Thought you might have been lying about that, though I suppose it’s not surprising seeing as how you live in the ass-end of nowhere. Let me give you a little education.

“As far as I have been able to tell, each and every one of us, everyone stolen from Earth, contains a certain amount of chaos. When we kill each other, the winner,” he looked pointedly at Richter, “that would be me in this case, gets all the Chaos Points the other person has. Exactly how much seems to vary, but I do know that the more times you die, the more points you come back with. The first chaos seed I killed, this pretty little elf girl, only gave me one point. She had never died before, you see.”

He waved his dagger in front of Richter’s face lasciviously. “Even though it was only one though, after I penetrated that bitch,” he winked, “in *every* sense of the word, that Chaotic energy flowed into me, and oooohhhh!” Heman closed his eyes and shivered in erotic memory, “It was better than freebasing devil’s breath back home!”

As he spoke, the madness of addiction danced behind his eyes. If Richter could have seen it, he would have recognized it immediately. He’d seen it back on Earth when he’d volunteered in the worst ERs. The all-consuming need that some patients had for a fix. So bad that if they didn’t have the money to score, then they might jump in front of a car just so they could get a few milligrams of dilaudid once they were brought into the hospital. Richter had seriously enjoyed the feeling of Chaos energy flowing into him, but he had never experienced the almost sexual reaction that Heman was describing.

How had he missed the fact that Heman was a junkie willing to do anything for his next fix? But of course, Richter already knew. As powerful as his own gifts and capabilities were, he was not invulnerable. Heman's own abilities had let the man play him like a fiddle. Richter's own trusting nature had indeed worked against him, but the fault didn't just lay in his poor judgment; the other chaos seed had powerful gifts of his own. Would every member of his race try to kill him? Would they all be so powerful?

Heman continued his story, unaware of Richter's internal thoughts, "I was sloppy that first time," he admitted. He said it as if he was man enough to own up to his mistakes. "You already know I was taken captive by the gnolls, and that I got them to trust me. What I haven't told you yet is that a few days later, my abilities let me take over the tribe completely. After that, life was a lot easier," he added with a laugh.

"Every day I spent with the gnolls deepened my hold over them. I was safe, protected and, since the gnolls had a bunch of captives, I wasn't short on companionship." The joy in his voice just deepened the hate Richter felt for him. "Let me tell you, those women were willing to do *anything*. The gnolls had a tendency to eat captives they didn't like. You wouldn't believe what an aphrodisiac that was. Dick or the stew pot. Wasn't too hard of a choice for most of them."

He leaned in and whispered conspiratorially to Richter, "Have you

ever fucked a high elf in the ass while her husband watched? I still don't know what I found more exciting, her tears or his!" He shivered again and Richter's hatred for him grew even deeper.

"While those diversions were fun, none of that came even close to comparing to my first chaos seed. I had already been leading the gnolls for a few weeks and the captives had pretty much wised up to the deal by that point. If they did what I wanted, I wouldn't pick them to be the gnolls' dinner that night. Basically, if they let me into their tummies, I'd keep them out of the gnolls' tummies."

He chuckled to himself before continuing, "One day though, the gnolls brought in a new herd of slaves," he said the word casually with no inflection whatsoever, "and there was this cute little thing. Blonde, nice perky tits, and tall! Whew! I was never into tree trunks back on Earth, but since being cursed with this half-gnome DNA... let's just say you can call me a lumberjack. I had the gnolls pull her out of her cage and told her what the deal was. Can you believe that bitch said she would rather die than give me just a little bit of pleasure? I mean," he said, shaking his head like he had had no other choice, "I had to do it after that. I just couldn't allow her to challenge me like that in front of the slaves, could I?"

He stopped talking for a moment and looked off into the distance. When he spoke again, it was with the measured pace of someone trying to

paint a picture in his audience's mind, "I had the gnolls crush both of her ankles. Little tip: if you ever want to get a stubborn whore into doggystyle, that does the trick. They tied her to a pole and I got to have my fun. Seeing as how she had said she wanted to die though, I decided to grant her request."

He leaned so close that Richter felt the man's breath on his cheek. His next horrific words were a breathy caress, "I just didn't let her die quickly. I let all the gnolls have a turn after I was done. Believe you me, those jackal-headed monsters aren't exactly gentle when they get all riled up. It's just a guess mind you, because I like to get a little sleep after I bestow my love, but I think she died while the twelfth one was still inside her."

Heman shrugged, "I told them not to use their claws too much, but like I already told you, they love the scent of fresh blood. The good news was, the rest of the tribe still got a turn. Gnolls didn't let a little thing like life and death stand between them and a good time." He waved a hand in the air as if none of that was important, just the buildup to his next point.

Heman smiled as he relived the experience, "Believe me, there is *no* better way to wake up than to have Chaos Points pouring into you. I had no idea what was happening, but I loved it! Before I could even stand up though, I got a prompt telling me I had killed my first chaos seed and that I'd been awarded the one Chaos Point she had. I had no idea what Chaos Points were for, and I didn't care. That shit felt so good!

“I was just lucky that I still got credit for the kill even though I didn’t finish her off myself. Don’t think I would have gotten the points otherwise.” He shrugged, “It was probably because I’m the one who gave the order for her to be raped to death. My Luck stat was only ten at that point, but I guess it was working overdrive that day.

“After I came down off my high, I realized what had happened and what I had to do next. I had already lived through my own rebirths, so I knew she would probably respawn somewhere near wherever the gnolls had found her before. I immediately sent a squad of warriors to look for her.”

Heman laughed in delight, “I cannot tell you how happy I was to see her only a day later. She wasn’t nearly as happy to see me. It hurt my feelings a bit, but that’s women, right? I’m a little ashamed to say it, but I was so ready for another fix that I beat her to death right then and there. The hit was even better that time. The piddly single point she’d given me before had felt good, but oh god! The three she gave me that time was like every orgasm I’d ever had all at once!

“This time, the gnolls knew exactly where to go when I sent them out to find her. I had to wait a few days, but it was absolutely hilarious when they brought her back a third time. The begging, the crying, it really did it for me. She even had snot running down her face like a little kid! My abilities didn’t work seeing as how I’d already hurt her, but I learned

something new that time.

“If you’re considered the leader of a community, you can control if someone ties their spawn point to your location. You see, when she came back that third time, all the fight had gone out of her. She was offering anything, literally begging to swallow my cum and promising that she would serve me forever. When she said that, the Universe took it as a request to make the gnolls’ village her rebirth point. I got the notification at the same time she did, but mine said that because I was the leader of the location, she could only do so if I allowed it! I don’t know which one of us was more surprised. I am sure which one of us was happiest though,” he finished with a laugh.

“It took a few hours of torture to make her do it, but cutting off someone’s hands and tits, then rubbing the stumps with salt will make them agree to anything! After that, it was so much easier. I had some more fun with her first, but then I just cut her head off. I got seven points that time, man.”

He sighed happily, “I had to wait a week that time for her to come back, but also got to see it for the first time, as did the gnolls. This rent appeared in the middle of the tribe, and you could see pure Chaos energy through it. When she fell through and landed at my feet, the gnolls thought I had summoned her back with some kind of powerful magic. It really

cemented my control over the tribe, let me tell you. This world is full of superstitious savages, man,” he told Richter, shaking his head.

“We went through the same dance again. ‘No, no, please don’t.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Please, I’m begging you!’ Blah blah blah. Honestly, I was a bit disappointed by her performance. The point is, and this is you learning a little something about me, I always loved history. That’s why I decided to be a little creative that time. I crucified her.” As with every other atrocity Heman had admitted to, he just sounded a bit gleeful as he talked about it. “I had always been curious about it, you see. It never sat right with me that literally everyone on Earth had heard about crucifixion, they talked about it in churches around the world, but no one had done it in centuries! Now you might be asking why this matters, so I’ll give you a little backstory.

“Back home, I was, shall we say, in the information-gathering business. In the course of my duties and in service to my government, I’d seen people killed in all manner of ways, but even I had never seen a crucifixion. One summer I even filled out a request, in triplicate, asking my superior if I could do it, just once. I told him it would really make people fear our security services. We would get ‘medieval’ as your homies used to say,” Heman joked with an evil smile on his face. He shook his head a few seconds later. “Can you believe that he refused my request? He even called me an animal. Can you believe that? Me!”

“After I murdered him, I asked his replacement if I could do it on another prisoner, and he called me an animal too!” Heman sighed heavily, “I can admit that I’m a bit headstrong, but even I will listen. Seeing as how they both said the same thing, I figured maybe they were right. I’m a big enough man to admit that sometimes my zeal for exploration and learning can get the best of me. I let it go.

“I never stopped being curious though. I mean, if it was a good enough way to kill Jesus, it should be good enough for anyone, right?” he declared, shaking his finger in the air. “Just seemed a little disrespectful to not keep up the tradition, and I’m all about tradition. When life presented me with this gorgeous woman, who I could not only crucify but then interview about the experience afterwards... well, it just seemed like a match made in heaven!

“I had the gnolls get to work building the cross. Finding that much wood underground was not too easy, let me tell you, but we got it built then got her up there. There was a complication at first. I’d had the gnolls nail her to the cross, but she was able to rip her hand free. She almost died from the blood loss.” Heman rolled his eyes, “It was insanely annoying. After I got her healed, we tied her up and that worked much better. When we finally got it right, I waited to see what would happen. And I waited. And I waited. And I waited.”

Heman shook his head in bemusement, “I definitely figured out why people don’t crucify anymore. It takes forever and it is so boring! True, she screamed her head off when her shoulder finally dislocated, but she lost consciousness from pain not too long after that. Richter,” he placed a hand on his captive’s shoulder in commiseration, “it was a total letdown. I couldn’t even wait till the end. I just sliced her open and let her guts fall to the floor.”

He shook his head in remembrance, but then he smiled. “Don’t worry, man. There’s a happy ending to this story. I got twenty Chaos Points that time! The rewards are doubled when you kill them a final time.” He was almost giddy as he related the experience.

Richter sat there, wrapped in pain and listening to the disgusting confessions. All he could do was seethe and watch the timer on his paralysis debuff count down, second by second. The whole time he had listened to Heman prattle on, he had prayed and begged for time to move faster, but he knew the other chaos seed wouldn’t allow that. He couldn’t even use the Shadow Ring as helpless as he was. Heman was going to kill him, but Hisako had told him that the monsters of the Shadow Realm might corrupt his very soul. Richter didn’t know why Heman was playing with him before the end, but he had no doubt that the end was coming.

Heman sighed again, but it was a sigh of contentment, “I was, of

course, upset that my toy was gone, but I adopted a new policy towards the prisoners that the gnolls brought in. I had them kept in separate cages and pretended to be one of them until I could be sure they weren't chaos seeds. I was disappointed again and again, but one day, it happened! I found another one. This time, he was a beastkin. Some sort of mole. Extremely ugly, but apparently there are entire tribes of the disgusting creatures living underground.

“Once I identified him, all it took was a little bit of theatre to have him bind his spawn point to the camp. I convinced him that I had befriended some of the gnolls and that they would let us out if we proved our loyalty by fighting for them. It wasn't the best story I had ever come up with, but I had the gnolls torture a few prisoners to death in front of him. That little show really put the man's choices into perspective. He was happy to do and try anything that would keep that from happening to him.” Heman chuckled at his own cleverness.

“After he agreed to fight, I convinced him to bind his spawn point to the gnolls' village so that we could find each other if the 'worst' happened. After all,” his voice changed to one of absolute sincerity, “we're all in this together.” He kept his earnest expression for a second, before he started laughing. The sound was thick with malice.

“After that, it was party time again! I found out Arvin, that was his

name by the way, had already died once before. I was so happy to find out that, just like the elf bitch, every time he was reborn he brought more Chaos Points back with him. It also took longer for him to come back each time, but it was worth the wait. He had five lives total, and ended up netting me forty points. God, each time was better than last! He was a bit... off that last time, but it didn't change the high!

“After poor old Arvin went bye-bye, I was actually planning to leave the gnoll tribe. No other chaos seeds had shown up for a month, and daddy needed his medicine,” he finished with a laugh. “Then the goblins attacked. I'll admit I was a bit bothered by that at first, but it wasn't hard to be taken prisoner rather than be killed. All I had to do was slaughter most of the slaves and then hide with the few that were left. They were all new and didn't know anything about me. The goblins were so irritated that fifty of the slaves were dead that they almost had no choice but to take the four of us that were left alive. After I was put with their other captives, I realized what an opportunity I'd been given. I talked to everyone and used my abilities to make them love me. It only took two weeks before I found my next chaos seed!

“I don't remember his name, but he'd clearly had a hard time of it. When I bashed the back of his head in with a rock he gave me fourteen points, and it was his last life. You know, I haven't really been able to find

any pattern in the total number of lives each of us is given, but I suppose that might just be implied in the name. *Chaos* seed, am I right?”

Heman kept prattling on for a bit, before once more picking up the water skin. The throbbing burn in Richter’s jaw turned into a supernova when he grabbed Richter’s jaw again. He forced more poison down his captive’s throat, increasing the paralysis timer by more than five minutes this time. Richter lost consciousness and was reawakened to the sensation of being slapped.

Richter’s head was clouded for a few moments, but he thought he heard Heman mutter something like, “...taking forever.”

Heman looked at him with a resigned expression, then he reached into the cubby again and drew out a dagger housed in a simple steel sheath. Turning back to Richter, he said, “Might as well finish my story. Like I was saying, I was having a great time murdering any chaos seed I could find, all after learning their spawn points, of course. I even made enough friends that I got them to camp those positions and bring me anyone that respawned. I gained over three hundred and fifty Chaos Points and had a grand time doing it!”

“I also spent some time gaining the trust of my goblin captors, but I was moved from place to place every few weeks so I never gained enough

relationship ranks to actually take over and escape. Not that I really wanted to. It certainly didn't help that my relationship with every goblin started in the red, usually at *enmity* or *loathing*. It was taking me weeks to even get to a *neutral* rank."

He shook his head, "As great as getting all those Chaos Points was, I found out that I hated mining. I mean I really hate it. You have no idea how many blisters I got swinging a pick at a wall of fucking rock." He sighed, "It was very frustrating. At least it was, until they took me to that hidden valley. They had us digging in that one place for more than a month. I had no idea why, but I was extremely happy that I was finally able to make serious relationship headway with one of the goblin slave masters.

"I tell you Richter, when they finally took me down that tunnel and showed me the Chaotic Shard... my life changed. Did yours?" Richter couldn't answer, of course, and he wouldn't have given Heman the satisfaction if he could, but in his heart, he knew the answer was yes. The Chaotic Shard was the most beautiful and wondrous thing he'd seen in either of his two lives.

"You don't need to say anything, I know you felt the same way," Heman told him. For the first time, there was no mockery or humor in his tone. Instead, his voice was tight with controlled emotion. "I saw that wonder, that piece of the divine, and knew it was my destiny to claim it. I

just needed a few more days to increase my relationship with the goblins until they would let me venture down the hall to touch it. After all those nights spent in darkness, after the beatings and stench and pain and death, I had not only found my purpose, but it was within my grasp!”

He looked at Richter with an expression of utter hate and righteous indignation, “And you,” the word lay thick on his tongue like the coarsest sand, “stole it from me.”

In that moment of hate, the unstable chaos seed almost killed Richter. He held the dagger in his hand high above his head, ready to strike and end his victim’s life. He stood there for long moments, staring down with righteous indignation, before regaining control of himself. His hand lowered and he squatted down so he could look directly into Richter’s ruined eyes.

Heman’s words came fast and clipped, like he was listing to irrefutable proof of Richter’s sins, “I know you claimed the shard, though you never admitted it. I’m almost positive that there are no other chaos seeds in your village, and the few that were in the valley with me had already been dealt with. I don’t know what protected it, but I do know several goblins and one troll died trying to get close. It could only have been another chaos seed that took the shard. It could only have been you! You stole from me, *Lord Richter*, and for that I’m going to do more than just kill you. I am going to take as many of your lives as I can!”

Heman looked around, remarking, “I had hoped it would have happened already, but I suppose alive or dead, you can serve the same purpose. Before I kill you, I will give you a thank you, a warning and a gift. The thank you is for giving me access to the Sea of Chaos. Even though you did it by being selfish and stealing my birthright, you still ushered in the new Age. Our age. The Age of Chaos.

“It helped me understand part of my purpose. It let me finally use my Chaos Points. That is how I got that wonderful paralysis poison and how I bought my hidden cupboard that I saw you were so impressed with. It’s also how I got this dagger.” Richter heard the sound of a blade clearing a sheath.

Master? Master? Master! she screamed to him. The relief in her voice at having been able to reestablish contact was stark and profound. Ever since reaching Psi Bond level three, they could sense if one another was in danger, but he couldn’t give her any information until she had flown close enough for them to communicate. Now that she had, he could send her images. His Traveler’s map allowed him to have a minimap in the corner of his vision and she could access the same information he could. A mental replay of his morning was all she needed to hone in on his general position.

She processed the information and promised him, **I’m coming, master. I’m coming. Just hold on!** Her voice was thick with sadness and broiling with anger, but all Richter felt was pain, joy and a resigned sadness.

Alma had come, but in his heart, Richter feared she had found him too late. Heman had unsheathed his blade and the death stroke couldn't be far away.

Heman knelt down, and rested a hand on Richter's shoulder. Blinded and helpless, he could just imagine his tormentor bracing with his left, while a blade hung poised to plunge into his heart with the man's right. When Heman spoke again, his voice was soft, even reverent, "In these last moments, perhaps your last moments in The Land or any world, I will give you the warning I promised. If you are reborn, do not follow me. I am not killing you with just any blade; this is a Chaotic dagger that will claim this life and one more rebirth if you have one to spare.

"I have never met another chaos seed who had more than five lives. I know you have already died twice so if you're lucky, and it seems that you are, then you will be reborn, but it could very well be your final life. You should be reborn in less than a month if you are, and you can live that life however you see fit. That is my gift to you.

"Stay in your shitty forest village, and I will leave you alone. If you come after me though, if I ever see your ugly, black face again, I will snatch away whatever life you have left. I will end you."

Richter felt Heman's weight shift, and he knew that in a bare second, the Chaos blade would enter his body and maybe sever his mortal coil for the

last time. His body calmed in acceptance of what was to come, and in that moment, he heard the sweetest sound he'd ever heard.

Master! I am here! I-aaaiiiieee, her words devolved into a scream of pure pain.

In that moment, Richter heard the worst sound he'd ever heard.

Through her eyes, he finally learned what the *zzzt* sound had been after he had first been poisoned. He saw a being made of lightning attacking his familiar. She dropped to the ground and was raked by claws of pure energy. Only her 50% resistance to Air creatures and attacks kept the damage from being almost instantly fatal. Then he heard Heman laugh.

“At last,” he laughed. “At last! *This* is what I’ve been waiting for. I had no intention of letting your little dragon chase me through the forest.” He gave an order and the lightning demon... for that was what it was, a minor demon summoned by a scroll he had purchased from the Sea of Chaos... stopped its attack.

Alma lay on the ground, one wing half-severed and blood leaking from her body. Richter cried out to her with his mind, but all she could manage was a weak, **master...**

Heman leered at Richter, “I am so happy she finally made her way here. I desperately wanted you to know that she was dead before I killed

you.” Even with his jaw fractured, Richter managed a strained, rage-filled groan.

“What?” Heman asked, mocking him. “Did you think that I was a cartoon villain that just couldn’t bring himself to kill you until I revealed my entire backstory and evil plan? No, you fool! You were bait! You see, my little minion,” he gestured to the lightning demon, “can’t travel far from where it was summoned, and I didn’t like my chances of making it through the forest with your flying rat hunting me. I just had to hope that after I used the scroll, she would come to your rescue if I dragged this out long enough.”

He walked over to Alma and stomped down on the dying dragonling’s remaining wing. Her delicate bones crunched, and she screamed, a sound Richter had never heard her make before. He willed his body to move! He had to reach her! He couldn’t let her be killed!

The Universe didn’t care about what he “had” to do. All he could do was lay on the ground impotently, unable to rise.

“You see,” the other chaos seed continued happily, “now I not only don’t have to worry about this fucking thing hunting me down, but I have the opportunity to teach you a *real* lesson. I know that in stories, men are always driven to seek revenge for the death of a wife or a child. In the *real* world though, that just isn’t how it works. On Earth, I ordered the deaths of many

wives. Many children. And what I found is that if you wound a man not just in his body, but in his soul, then you can break him. That pain, that hurt, cuts so deep that he cannot face it. That is how you break a man. That is how I am going to break you.

“Remember this moment, *Lord Richter*, because if you ever come after me, I will kill everyone you have ever loved in this world. I will use my abilities to raise armies. I will slaughter every man and woman in your village and I will blind every child before selling them into slavery. I will burn the very heart out of you.” His voice was deadly with intent. “Like so.”

Through Alma’s eyes, he saw Heman inhale to give an order to the lightning demon. An order that would end Alma’s life. Richter did the only thing he could think to do. He retreated into his mindscape. The time shift gave him seconds to think. Seconds that he could do nothing with except call out to Alma in pain and fear for her life.

He searched his mindscape, looking for her familiar winged form, until he saw her scaled body lying in a field outside of his mind’s village. Literally quick as thought, he ran to her crumpled form. The wounds in her physical body did not show, but the pain and anguish she had suffered had sapped her will to move.

“What can I do?” he cried while holding her beautiful face. “What

can I do?” If only he could get to her body. If only they could bond!

Even as he pleaded with her for an answer, he saw Heman finish his command in the real world and the lightning demon prepare to deliver the killing blow. His very being cried out, the thought of her death causing a pain greater than he had ever experienced. It echoed across the dimensions of his soul.

His cry was answered.

Her voice echoed, not in his head, but his heart. For the first time, he understood the true connection of a soul familiar. She was never truly apart from him, for everything that they were or ever could be, was intertwined on the deepest level imaginable. Her words resonated in his soul and spoke the fundamental truth of their being, “You are not alone.”

In that space between seconds, he understood. Through her eyes he saw himself, lying against a tree, paralyzed and beaten. Despite all that, he reached for her, not outside of himself, through the distance of space, but instead inside of himself, to the part of his soul that was also her.

*The **Messeji** has begun!*

Time froze and beams of blue-white light shot from Alma’s eyes into Richter’s ruined orbs. Faster than even the lightning demon could react, the dragonling’s ruined body changed into pure Mental energy and was absorbed

by her master. Their experiences, thoughts, and powers became as one and yet were still distinct. To Heman, the process appeared instantaneous, but to Richter and Alma, they shared long moments of love and companionship, enough to fill a lifetime.

A prompt appeared and was immediately absorbed by their minds.

*Congratulations! You have deepened your union with your soul familiar! As such, you have developed the following capabilities. You may now find one another over vast distances. Never will you be truly lost to one another. The **Messeji** can now occur if you are within eye contact and within 100 yards of one another. Over time, this distance may grow. At times when either of you are near death, when the veil between this world and the next are thinned, you may speak the **Truth of Souls**.*

Neither Richter nor Alma understood half of the what the prompt meant, but it didn't matter, because there was one other notification that changed everything.

Know This! Mind, Body and Soul are distinct but always joined. Through the Messeji, each of you become pure Mental energy for a time between moments. As such, your dragon form will have full health no matter the state of your human body. Be warned! Resuming your individual forms will restore any prior injuries. Continue to push the limits of your power, young

Master; it is the only way to learn your potential!

Both prompts were absorbed and processed instantly by the method Randolphus had taught him. Even if they hadn't had the information, Richter and Alma would have known they were healed due to the lack of pain and the fact that Richter could move his jaw again. Even more importantly, his eyes had been completely restored and the change in his head's shape shifted the blindfold. He could see!

Wasting no time, he inhaled deeply, even as Heman turned his head from where Alma had disappeared to where Richter still lay. The other chaos seed only had time to widen his eyes, either in fear or rage, but nothing else before Richter breathed *Glass Flame*!

Near-invisible fire shot from Richter's mouth in a cone-shaped attack. The flame washed over Heman, charring his white skin to black in an instant. In a moment of rare cosmic justice, he was blinded just as he had blinded Richter. The lightning demon threw its body between Richter and its master, following the simple command Heman had given it to protect him from any harm. Though its body was immune to physical damage and almost completely immune to heat, not even the demon could withstand the savagery of dragon fire. It lasted for six seconds, a living shield to protect Heman's now-collapsed form, before dying with a wail almost too high-pitched to be heard. Even though the cost was its life, the demon had accomplished its

goal to preserve its master as the seven-second time limit on Richter's attack elapsed.

Even though the damage Heman had inflicted on Richter had healed, he still remained paralyzed as the poison coursed through his body. Another thing Richter learned in the following minute was the naturally high resistance most dragons had to poison. The counter on his paralysis icon plummeted, and before long he could stand once more.

The whole time he had sat against the tree, he had watched Heman's smoking figure. *Analyze* told him that the man was still alive. If the torturer had somehow managed to weather the one second he'd been exposed to *Glass Flame*, Messeji form or not, Richter would still have been helpless. The chaotic dagger still lay next to the man's body, the exposed grey blade flashing with an internal, swirling light.

By the time Richter was back on his feet though, Heman still hadn't moved. Powerful though the other chaos seed's abilities were, he was still only a level seven mortal. The invisible fires of Richter's attack had triggered a cascade of cytokines and neurotransmitters, sending him into shock. His heart rate had increased to over two hundred beats a minute as it tried to compensate for the drop in blood pressure. Blood was shunted away from the periphery of his body and towards his internal organs in a vain attempt to keep a failing system running.

His body was attempting an impossible feat. Even if blood loss and massive tissue trauma could be survived, Heman had screamed while he'd burned. His open mouth had provided a perfect channel for the flames washing over him. In addition to his eyes having melted, his throat had been seared and charred. Even if all of his other wounds would heal, Heman would still not be able to breath properly. In another show of karmic balance, he would slowly suffocate as the carbon dioxide built in his blood and his lungs filled with fluid, a crucifixion death without the crucifix.

The cold stare in Richter's eyes as he stood over the man left no doubt that neither scenario would be how Heman finally died. *Analyze* showed that Heman had less than twenty health left and something was making his remaining HPs trickle away. Richter grinned, revealing his sharp teeth. "Not yet," he hissed.

Richter picked up the Chaotic dagger.

You have found: Chaotic Dagger	Attack: +14 Durability: 1,000/1,000 Item Class: Rare Quality: Exquisite Weight: 1.2 kg Traits: Once unsheathed, it will disappear in 24 hours. If claiming the life of a Chaos seed, it will not only
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	end their current life, but also an additional one of their respawns. Your victim's respawn time will be doubled based on their new respawn count.
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Looking at Heman's ruined body, he cast *Weak Slow Heal*, replenishing the man's health by forty-five points over the next sixty seconds. He smiled again when he thought about how he would be taking that health right back in very short order. First though, he wanted to know what the other chaos seed had stashed away. If there was good stuff in there, Richter didn't want to risk that it might disappear when he killed Heman in a few minutes. The invisible door was still open in the air.

The Messeji dragon waved his taloned arm in the space around the open cubby, but he couldn't feel the door or any exterior sides of the cupboard. Looking past the plane of the compartment didn't show anything either; it was only visible from one side. Curiosity now at least partially satisfied, Richter looked to see what items Heman had stored. His sharp-toothed smile grew. The other chaos seed had been busy!

You have found: Venom of	Item Quality: Unusual Durability: 7/7 Weight: 0.8 kg
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Pals Cobra	Traits: The potent venom of a pals cobra will paralyze targets for 30 seconds to 1 minute if applied to a weapon, and 4-9 minutes if ingested. Doses: 2/4
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You have found: Emerald Ring with White Gold Band	Jewelry Class: Uncommon Jewelry Quality: Well Crafted Gem Clarity: ??? Carats: ??? Durability: 14/14 Weight: 0.5 kg
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The ring wasn't magical, but the gem was the size of his thumbnail. He also didn't have a Jeweling skill high enough to know its exact clarity or how many carats it was, but Richter was pretty sure it was expensive. Randy should be happy about that, he thought.

There were also several pouches, each of which had a pleasant clinking sound.

You have found: Pouch	Durability: 6/7 Weight: 2.1 kg Contents: 9 Gold Weights 12 Silver Weights
You have	Durability: 4/8

found: Pouch	Weight: 1.3 kg Contents: 15 Gold Bands 4 Silver Bands 8 Copper Bands
You have found: Pouch	Durability: 5/6 Weight: 0.8 kg Contents: 97 Gold Crowns
You have found: Pouch	Durability: 3/7 Weight: 0.7 kg Contents: 96 Silver Marks
You have found: Pouch	Durability: 2/5 Weight: 0.5 kg Contents: 471 Copper Shills

If Richter had to guess, this was the sum wealth of the gnoll tribe and whomever else Heman had been able to steal from since coming to The Land. Ten copper shills made one silver mark and ten marks made a gold crown. With each weight being worth twenty-five coins and each band being worth ten, he had just found over five hundred and fifty gold crowns!

He now saw why Heman had probably been so attracted to the idea of a hidden storage space that would always stay with him. It must have been a pain and a half to hide such treasures, especially in slave-like conditions. His abilities had most likely helped him create a gang with relative ease, but still,

it couldn't have been fun.

That thought made Richter feel all warm and gooey inside, almost as much as stealing every single one of Heman's possessions. He started to turn back towards Heman's charred form, when he had an absolutely wonderful idea. Taking what he needed from his bag, he jotted down a short note and placed it on the bottom shelf.

Richter put all Heman's possessions into his Bag of Holding, except for the large pouch of coppers. That he upended, keeping the brown leather container in his hand. Then, making sure that Heman hadn't revived enough to know what was happening, he took out a small canister, placed it into the pouch, and grabbed copper coins to pad the sides. On a cursory glance, it would look exactly the same. Richter used a small length of wire to attach the mechanism to the mouth of the pouch. With an evil grin, he placed the coin purse back in the cubby right next to his letter. With all of that done, he turned back to Heman, the Chaotic dagger clenched tightly in his taloned fist. The time for games had passed.

The time for blood had come.

Richter had cleared out the cubby and placed his own little gift inside in under two minutes. His healing spell had run its course, restoring almost half of Heman's life, but it was continuing to trickle away. As Richter stared

down at his torturer, the man that would have stolen *lives* away from him, he experienced a particular mix of thoughts.

The first was that he should keep the man alive. That he should take him back to the village, hope to find Hisako or Sumiko in time to heal him and then have Randolphus use some of his counterintelligence techniques to get more information from the chaos seed. Richter was fairly certain Heman would break under the tender ministrations of the Spy's knives. He could even persuade him to bind his spawn point back at the village. After that he could farm the man for Chaos Points until he died the final death. It was no more than he deserved.

Richter didn't feel any moral compunction against torture. Not with this rapist piece of shit. In all honesty, he didn't feel too bad about it in general if it was used against those that would harm him or his people. He'd barely been in The Land a week when he'd tortured a goblin with Sion. He hadn't really felt too squeamish even when he'd been back on Earth.

One of his favorite shows had been called Firefly. Originally, it had only run for one season originally, way before his time, but it had still made a serious impact on his life. One of the lines that had always resonated was when the captain, Malcolm Reynolds, had simply stated, "I look out for me and mine. That don't include you 'less I conjure it does."

That simple statement had always seemed to cut through the whining and bullshit of right and wrong. You take care of your family. Don't cause ill or harm those who can't defend themselves, but if anyone sets themselves against you, god help them, because he wouldn't. Living in The Land had only further cemented all of that as core principles of his being.

Even though he had no problem killing this man over and over, he also still refused to be led around by his emotions. Richter was still furious, so angry that he was nearly out of control in fact, and that made him pause and think. He would love to make Heman's last days in this existence a macabre nightmare, but Richter was also practical. One, he only had a few minutes left before the Messeji elapsed. As soon as that happened, his eyes and mouth would be ruined again. It was vital that he make it back to the village before that happened. He also wasn't foolish enough to think that he could kill Heman multiple times in secret. If there was one thing he had learned since becoming a lord, it was that there were consequences to how his people felt. This piece of shit wasn't worth losing ranks in the village's Morale or Loyalty.

Even more important, he wasn't sure just how many of his people had been infected by Heman's abilities. He couldn't risk a revolt if Heman had managed to sway the hearts and minds of any of his people. No. The man couldn't be allowed to return to the village. He had to be dealt with now, but

first, Richter had his own message to deliver.

He turned Heman over. The man's breaths were coming in short gasps, and every section of his face was either charred black or blistered red. One eye was just gone along with the eyelid. Richter could see the bone of the eye's socket, also scorched black by his *Glass Flame* attack. The other eye was completely bloodshot and the sclera had turned milky, but the structure remained more or less intact. All of the hair was gone from Heman's face and part of his scalp had been burned away to the skull.

The extra durability damage Richter's breath attack caused had literally made the leather armor Heman was wearing char and turned to dust. Just the act of moving him had made the ashes fall away, three hundred and twenty-eight points of durability damage having occurred in just the one second the man had been exposed before his summoned demon had blocked the rest of the attack.

Alma and her master listened to him wheeze for a few seconds. Small bubbles of blood formed and popped on his ruined lips, and it was clear that Heman did not have much time left in this life. Richter watched him slowly die and came to a decision. The piece of shit hadn't suffered enough.

The chaos seed dual cast *Minor Slow Heal*. His mana dropped by several hundred points all at once, but it let him restore all of Heman's health

points. At least, as many HPs as the man's ruined body allowed to be restored. The other chaos seed's max health had been reset from one hundred and thirty down to ninety-two to account for the portions of his body that had been burned away, never to return. The healing magic could not heal the worst of the man's internal injuries either.

It also could not replace the epidermis or basement membranes of his skin, so any burned area became shiny and smooth like baby oil gleaming in the sun. The ruin of his throat tightened as scar tissue formed all at once. Much more advanced Life magic would be needed to bring Heman back to full health, but Richter had already known his spell would not fully restore his foe. He was still more than happy with the results. His soul cheered as Heman came back to consciousness with a ragged gasp and strangled cry of pain.

"That's right, sunshine," Richter hissed at him, smiling his sharp-toothed smile. "I was raised to show the proper respect. Since you went out of your way to give me a thank you, a warning and a gift, I figured I'd do the same for you before I snatch the life right out of you. First, thank you for sharing that information. I had been wondering about a lot of that. Also, thank you for all the gold!"

Even blinded and in agony, Heman's face screwed up in anger. If nothing else, he wasn't a total coward. The chaos seed tried to spit and curse

Richter but his ruined throat would not allow either. That didn't mean the Enchanter would let such insolence pass.

“No, no. We can't have that,” Richter tutted. Reaching down with his free hand, he slowly pushed his taloned hand into the soft, newly healed flesh of Heman's chest. The pink skin parted easily and red blood began to pool and run from all five points that Richter had pierced. A new scream ripped from Heman's throat, louder than the last despite the scar tissue caging his vocal cords. Richter kept his fingers in the man's chest, but stopped moving his talons. The other chaos seed stopped wailing half a minute later, and this time when he looked back, the only thing in his gaze was pain and fear.

“That's better,” Richter smiled anew. “Back home, we would say, ‘Fix your face or I'll fix it for you,’ but in this case,” the chaos seed chuckled, “I think we both know that ship has sailed. I also don't think we have much time left together since your health is still falling, so let me give you your warning.”

He moved close enough that he could have snapped his reptilian jaws shut on the other chaos seed's face if he chosen to do so, “I do not care who you were back on Earth. I do not care what you think you are owed. I do not care how mad you will be if you are ever reborn. My warning is not the same as yours. I'm not telling you that if you stay away, then I will let you be. I'm

not telling you never to come back. I'm telling you that it doesn't matter if you do. My warning is that you should stay dead. If you are reborn, I will come for you. One day, in this long existence we have ahead of us, I will find you again, and I will feed your soul to the worst demon I can find. Now drink."

Richter forced one of Tabia's new health elixirs into Heman's mouth, going so far as to force the vial down his throat so it would all be swallowed. The potion would heal four hundred and fifty-one points of damage over the next sixteen seconds. That was how much pain Richter could inflict before the other man died, and he planned to use every point.

Richter dug his fingers into Heman's chest down to the second knuckle, eliciting another wave of pleading howls. If the half-gnome was hoping to appeal to the mercy in Richter's heart though, he was left disappointed. There was no mercy. There was no heart.

Instead, Richter gave him the promised gift: time. The dragon leaned over Heman's face, at long last establishing a mental connection. In the last seconds of his life, Richter stared into his one milky eye. It might be blinded in the real world, but it still provided the conduit need to draw him into mental combat and prolong his anguish as much as the time-dilating effects of the psychic battle would allow.

Heman's mindscape appeared, with no mental defenses whatsoever. It was an open grassland dotted here and there with ghost-like figures. Instinctively, Richter knew these were Heman's memories of his many victims, stuck in a perpetual loop of suffering for the psychopath's amusement.

Even if Heman had been in a castle, it would not have protected him from Alma's wrath. With a savage roar, the great dane-sized dragonling sped from Richter's territory to begin savaging the mind of the man that had dared to steal her master from her! Heman's avatar tried to run, letting loose a squeal of animal fear, but there was no escape. She took him to the ground and tore long furrows in his consciousness with her claws. Red blood began to stain the ground of his mindscape.

Richter continued to stare down at Heman's screaming body in the real world, even as he watched the man's psychic avatar howl as Alma pulled it apart. The dragonling was in no mood to be merciful and began by tearing Heman's leg off. Then she began eating him, starting at his crotch. She snapped and tore his manhood free, the bloody morsel sliding down her gullet before she took another bite from his stomach. A hearty laugh began in her master's throat, half madness and half heartless evil. Watching the unrestrained violence, something stirred in the hidden depths of Richter's soul. A monster that had been bound and chained deep within him his entire

life rattled its cage and dreamed of being free.

Richter wasn't consciously aware of any of that. The entire time that he had enjoyed Heman's mental and physical torture, the dragon chaos seed had never forgotten himself. With clinical precision, in the last seconds of his foe's life, he slid the tip of the chaotic dagger into the man's side. Even with the health potion quickly repairing damage, it could not keep up with the havoc Richter's talons were wreaking on Heman's internal organs. The furious lord made sure never to push too hard or too fast and risk his victim dying before he wanted, but short of that, he brought a hellscape to The Land in the form of Heman's ruined flesh.

Too soon, Richter knew his fun was coming to an end. He gave an order to Alma, who abandoned her own sport and stared into Heman's face. The man's body had lapsed into unconsciousness, but his mind had no such escape, caught in the mindscape. Heman looked up at her in utter terror, and this man, who had thought he was a predator, learned what it truly meant to be prey. Richter's own avatar had walked up during Alma's assault and now looked down at the armless, legless and cockless avatar of his enemy.

Richter's smile was a mirror in time, the same heartless expression Heman had worn himself at the start of their pain-filled drama. His avatar squatted down, putting a hand behind the helpless man's head and lifting it until their mental eyes met, "Remember. If you wake up, and you still feel

raw about what happened here today...,” his voice was deadly with promise, “I’ll be waiting.”

Not caring what Heman might say in response, Richter just dropped the mutilated body and stood giving a simple command, “Finish it.”

A smile on her draconian face, Alma’s avatar sucked in a deep breath then exhaled near-invisible flames. She redoubled her efforts, and the new psychic attack burned away both the top half of his avatar and his conscious mind. With only five health remaining in Heman’s body in the real world, Richter triggered *Brain Drain*, the talons plunged into the other chaos seed’s chest providing the conduit needed for the special attack.

Heman’s last health drained away, and his mindscape vanished, leaving only Richter’s. Alma’s avatar flew into the air roaring her triumph. The body of Richter’s enemy exhaled its last breath in real life and the light left his eyes. The forest was quiet; even the small creatures hiding in their burrows and bracken were struck silent by the violence and hate that had just polluted their home.

The chaotic dagger flashed with a hungry, grey light before winking out of existence. The only remaining evidence that it had ever existed was the small hole it had made in Heman’s side. A torrent of prompts appeared in Richter’s vision, but he ignored all of that, his attention completely occupied

by the *incredible* feeling coursing through his body. Grey Chaos energy flashed from Heman and into Richter all at once! It was completely different from the sense of fulfillment he experienced when he had absorbed the chaotic shard and particle. That energy had felt raw and wild, but the power he had just taken from the other chaos seed felt... refined.

“Damn,” Richter intoned slowly, closing his eyes in near ecstasy.
“That *does* feel good!”

The taking of Heman’s Chaos Points had distracted him for a moment, but he didn’t forget the damage that would be revisited upon his body as soon as the Messeji ran its course. Before he could move though, his attention was drawn back to his mindscape. The remains of Heman’s avatar had begun to glow with blue-white light that rose in thin streams. In seconds, they had formed a pyramid of memory, *Brain Drain* having captured a poignant moment in the man’s life.

Richter looked at it in fascination, his curiosity even stronger than the bloodlust that had filled him only seconds before. He had never seen the process of a memory being captured before. All he had time for was that feeling of fascination, before a grey rent appeared in the center of the memory pyramid. He did not know it, but it was the same tear in reality that always appeared when a chaos seed was reborn. It was the doorway to the Realm of Chaos. A great wind appeared a moment later, a sucking force

thousands of time stronger than a tornado, which picked up Richter's avatar and pulled it through the rent in reality.

Alma cried out for her master, but the tear closed, taking with it any hope that she had to follow.

CHAPTER 93 – Retained Memory



Richter looked around. Everything was a grey that was at once both featureless and filled with infinite variation. He thought he might be moving, but then he was sure he was standing still. There was nothing. Then he was standing in a sea of tables. Strapped to every table was a person. Some were screaming. Some were laughing. Many stared upward, unblinking, their chests slowly rising and falling.

There was no orientation, but somehow, everywhere was up. Richter looked around. Screaming as loud as a mouse's whisper and dancing with glee.

"I'm losing my mind," he commented, as panicked as a summer day's eclipse.

"I know," another version of himself answered, "but at least we're better off than that guy."

They both looked over at a Richter strapped to a table. He turned his

head and smiled with a mouthful of candy scorpions, stinging him again and again until he died of diabetes and was reborn as a phoenix made of ice and plasma. The entire process lasted the same length of time that it took a man to forget an inconceivable thought.

Another Richter agreed, as he flew off on bat wings, “Yeah, it could be always be worse.”

“You know, I always thought you were cute,” second Richter told him, running a finger slowly down his chin.

They grew old together, lived a life of joy, but could never agree if the answer really was forty-two. When Richter died, the tombstone read, ‘He’s Richter’ mostly because they ran out of money and the letters were twenty dollars each and apostrophes were free.

“Nooooooooo!” Richter screamed, squeezing his head to keep the cosmos inside contained. The effort was futile.

~*WHAT IS THIS!*~ A voice as large as a universe boomed.

A spotlight fell from above, and a fetus that would one day be named James/Silk/Richter, floated in the middle of it, surrounded by seven faces the size of fractal realities. The entire septet regarded the interloper that had defiled their realm.

~*SACRILEGE!*~ one face boomed. Two more agreed, but four did

not.

~I RECOGNIZE WHAT THIS BEING WILL BE,~ spoke the first face before it mated with the fifth and was eaten by their children who phased into a unisex progenitor that underwent mitosis.

~DEATH!~

~MERCY!~

~SALVATION!~

~HOPE!~

~CHOICE!~

~CHOICE?~

~CHOICE! CHOICE! CHOICE!~

~CHOOSE!~

It took a time beyond Richter's ability to understand for the seven Lords of Chaos to stop their argument, but he did know that one photon had traveled beyond the curve of the Universe and found itself lonely. The Lords had agreed though, on the one thing that always unified them. The one constant of their constantly shifting nature: choice.

It took further ages beyond measure where suns hatched dragons before Richter realized that the word that had been echoing the whole time

was actually an order and, marvel of marvels, it was directed at him. He wasn't even sure that he knew what "him" was, but for the first time in seven eternities, Richter had an orientation. The simultaneous, infinite realities of the Realm of Chaos were too much for his mortal mind, and could barely be survived by the quasi immortality of his soul, but now he was given one chance among an immeasurable number to save himself.

Now a full-grown man, still floating in the light, he saw beneath his feet every possibility. Acts of profound joy, worlds of hatred, galaxies of unfeeling robots and universes of peace so oppressive that gods prayed to demons for mercy. Each represented an ideal and a concept in every possible variation. The deepest part of himself understood that he was being given a choice of what principle he cherished above all others. For Richter, given every choice in existence, there was none. Without speaking, before he was even born, his choice had been made.

Freedom.

There was a moment of intense quiet, as the seven faces of the Lords of Chaos observed his infinitesimal insignificance. Then they all sped around the periphery of the circle they had made around him, slamming into one another and merging into one. That singular visage regarded Richter's naked form. Its mouth opened. It yawned wider and wider, impossibly large, until it swallowed not only Richter but the entire reality he dwelt in, and then

itself.

He floated through memory and time.

“Richter.”

“Richter,” the voice was gentle and reassuring.

The chaos seed opened his eyes, marveling for a moment that he had eyes, and saw a kind-looking man sitting across from him. That was when Richter realized he was sitting. That was when he realized he could feel again. Looking around, he saw that they were in a cozy wooden room. A fireplace was set against one wall and a merry blaze danced inside of it. He could feel a faint bit of heat on the side of his face. It didn't feel hot, just nice and warm.

The chair he was sitting in was plush. It held him with just the right amount of support, and was upholstered in a soft red velvet. A thick rug was beneath his feet, but his bare toes felt nothing but softness as they kneaded its furry top. Across from him sat the man that had spoken. He was a white man about fifty or sixty years of age, but laugh lines and a kind smile made him seem younger. He was wearing brown linen pants and a simple white long-sleeved shirt that looked like it was made out of soft and supple cotton.

The man was looking at Richter, waiting for him to collect himself. He was reclined easily back in his own red chair and seemed content to

patiently wait. A side table nestled against the side of his chair with a silver tray resting atop it. A teapot and two small cups rested atop that. Richter could detect the faint scent of mint.

There were no exits from the room that the chaos seed could see, except for possibly the fireplace, but he didn't plan to dive into the flames. Besides, this was literally one of the most relaxing and calming rooms he had ever been in. His thoughts still felt a bit scattered, but after a minute he had collected enough of himself to want more information. He used *Analyze* on the man.

Nothing happened.

That was not exactly true. Something *did* happen, just not what Richter had expected. No status window appeared, but the man did laugh.

"I am afraid none of your skills, abilities or magic will work here, young chaos seed." The man's voice was friendly and kind as it had been before, a fact which really did set Richter at ease. He realized he shouldn't be so relaxed, but it didn't change the fact that he just wanted to trust this man. Another distant part of him realized there was probably some magic at work here, but he just couldn't bring himself to care.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am one of the infinite archetypes of the Lords of Chaos. I was selected to speak with you because of your

CHOICE and because being exposed to the raw power of the Lords was ripping your essence apart.”

Richter thought back to the eternities that had just passed in the blink of an eye and couldn't disagree. He only remembered vague flashes. A laugh, a scream, an intense hunger so great he could devour whole worlds... somehow, that last snippet of memory disturbed him intensely. Was that his hunger or something hungering for him?

The archetype waited for Richter to deal with his internal thoughts, once again exhibiting saintly patience. When the chaos seed met his eyes once more, the older man continued, “For convenience sake, you may call me Pug.” His eyes glittered with devilment as Richter's own eyes widened. “No relation,” he added, but Richter was almost sure he caught a wink as the man turned his head to the side and coughed.

“Let me give you some information,” Pug told him. “When you claimed a memory from the other chaos seed Heman, the memory that you gained was actually from his time in the Realm of Chaos.”

“That place with all those people strapped to tables?” Richter asked. “That was real?” One thing he *did* remember were the wails of pain and fear coming from what had looked like hundreds of thousands of people being restrained.

“Yes,” Pug replied with sympathy in his voice. “You already know how deleterious being exposed to the Realm can be for your people. The tables help to limit the Possibility Curve and keep their essence more or less intact. At least for most, and before you ask, the answer is yes. You went through this process as well.”

Richter blinked, processing that as he continued to listen, “Your world was touched by the Lords of Chaos millions of years before you were born. A small spark of their infinite was left in your species. I do not know why. As an archetype I know many things, but can still only grasp the smallest iota of the Lords’ true power and knowledge. What I do know is that they were... unhappy to find that your planet, their planet, had been harvested. They have now put a stop to it, through your own actions, but not before hundreds of millions of Earthers had been brought to The Land.”

“Through my actions?”

“Yes. It was your action of touching the first crystal shard and ending the Epoch of Banished Gods, that let the Age of Chaos begin. It greatly increased the Lords’ power in The Land and allowed them to exert influence not only on Earth but also on the world you now call home.”

Anger began to swell in Richter’s heart. An anger that had been denied to him for many months, “If they didn’t like it, if they’re so powerful,

then why did they have to wait for me? Why couldn't they have stopped all of this from happening before we were all taken?" Richter demanded.

"Before I was take from my family?" He stopped talking, extremely confused. Why did he suddenly care that he hadn't seen his family? Why was he so angry?

Pug wasn't bothered by the outburst. Instead, he just nodded in sympathy, understanding more about Richter's heart than the chaos seed did himself. "The Lords' Power is the mastery of infinite Possibility, but Possibility is not the only infinite power. I hope you are not offended when I tell you that any further explanation would be too complicated for you to understand. After what you have experienced, I believe you know in your heart that I speak the truth."

He waited until the defiance left Richter's face before continuing. If the chaos seed hadn't even been able to tolerate existing in the Realm of Chaos, he probably did literally lack the capacity to understand the motivations of its Lords, let alone their relationship with other 'infinite powers.'

The archetype continued speaking, "Suffice it to say, they had to wait until the conditions were right. Until you, or another chaos seed, released more Chaotic essence into The Land. I understand your frustration more than you know, but you should feel proud. No more of your people can be taken

from the Earth against their will. I must tell you, however, that the corridor between The Land and Earth, now that it has been created, can never be fully sundered. Humans may still find their way to The Land if they so choose.”

“Can anyone find their way back?” Richter asked with desperation in his voice. He missed his friends and family desperately. It was as if all his emotions had been trapped behind a dam for months, but now that barrier had burst. He felt like he was drowning in heartache and sorrow.

Pug looked at him intently. The chaos seed had no idea what the archetype was seeing, but it wasn’t long before Pug’s eyes widened slightly in comprehension. The older man stared intently at him and, a moment later, the tsunami of feelings eased inside the chaos seed. Richter heaved a sigh of relief. His breath had even started coming faster without him knowing it in response to his worsening emotional instability. Being free from the maelstrom of feelings was a blessing and he looked at the archetype thankfully. He still felt his emotions, but they were coming at a more manageable level.

“I apologize,” Pug told him with sincerity. “I have not existed in a corporeal state for several eons. It did not occur to me that removing the block could overwhelm you.”

“The block?”

Pug looked hesitant, “We can discuss that in a moment. For now, let me tell you that the beings that abducted you belong to an ancient race called the Dark Court.”

“The Originals?” Richter interrupted.

“Yes, and their offspring, the Dark Exiles. The Light Court may have been involved with abducting humans taken after you. There is much that remains unclear. Somehow, despite the protections the Lords of Chaos put in place, the Dark Court discovered Earth. As far as the Lords have been able to deduce, the Court had planned for the sparks of Chaos inside of each of you to be released upon your deaths. Over time, the amount of Higher Energy could accumulate and might very well have destroyed The Land. Of course, by its very nature, Chaos energy might do anything.”

“Doesn’t sound like a solid plan,” Richter commented.

Pug pursed his lips ruefully, “As I said, there is much that we still do not know. What I can tell you is that though the Lords could not stop the exodus of their children into The Land,” he held up a finger with a devilish smile, “they were able to delay it a bit. By bringing each of you here, to the Realm of Chaos, first, they were able to change you.

“Some of you gained powerful abilities, others changed their race, all of you were given extra lives. The effects were varied, as every seed of

Chaos within your people is, by their very nature, unique. The Lords could not stop your abductions, but they were able to gift you and your people with a chance to be more than just fodder. Finally, they found a way to stop at least some of the Chaos inside all of you from just being released into the The Land to wreak havoc. They ensured that if one chaos seed were killed by another, the chaos inside of them would be captured, rather than just released. Everything, except for the initial seed of Chaos that each of your souls grew from, could be harvested and used to make each of you stronger.”

Richter’s eyes grew wide and his heart started thudding again, this time in anger, “That was because of you? You and your Lords? You say that like it’s a gift! I was almost butchered because of that! That piece of shit Heman killed, I don’t know *how* many others, because you set us up for some Highlander-Lord of the Flies bullshit!”

Pug’s demeanor turned quick as a tornado. He bounded up from his chair, crossed half the five feet separating them and stabbed a finger into Richter’s face. The kind old man was gone. What was there in its place was the wrath of an immortal archetype, “Do not blame the Lords for your own choices! Each and every one of you signed the contract.

“It was buried in the fine print of the game. You had to click past it each and every time you decided to play. Almost none of you ever paid attention and the few that did, thought it was a joke! A joke! As if a fear of

such magical contracts had not been embedded in your very psyches! Do not deny it for I know that it was! Every single culture that evolved on your planet had cautionary tales about the dangers of making deals with higher powers. The Lords are not to blame for the careless arrogance of your people! You are!”

Richter leaned back in his chair, stunned. He couldn’t deny the truth of the archetype’s words though. While many gamers hadn’t known about the “contract,” serious players like himself and his friends had deep-dived on forums and message boards. He and Crush had even had a good laugh about it. They *had* just thought it was a joke. After learning the importance of words since coming to The Land, that defense seemed beyond weak. Still, the archetype wasn’t done.

“Even then, even with the pure *stupidity*,” he spat the word, “of nearly a billion of your people signing that contract day after day, each time laying the framework for the magic that brought you to The Land, the spell would not have worked. The lack of magic on Earth made it like a rune that had never been awakened. The contract was not enough.”

The archetype leaned over Richter now, both hands on either arm of the chair, “Can you think of anything that might have powered their spell, young chaos seed? Anything that might have breathed life into such a magical construct? Anything that might have given the spellform access to

the only magic that exists on your planet?”

Pug stood there, staring implacably at Richter, not letting him hide from the truth. The answer was obvious. If the archetype was telling the truth, and in his heart, Richter knew that he was, then the only magic on Earth was Chaos. If that was true, then the only plausible answer was, “Me. It was me. I triggered the spell,” he answered quietly. The enormity of what he had done pressed him back in his chair as much as Pug’s unyielding stare.

The older man’s demeanor calmed again and he stopped looming over the overwhelmed chaos seed. “Yes,” he affirmed softly, “You were asked if you would willingly leave your home. You were asked if, ‘as the agent of your people,’ would you ‘embrace a life of adventure and danger, love and betrayal, power and wonder’ so that you would ‘be among the first to move forward, preparing the way for others.’ Using your Choice, they could use the Chaos magic within you, and they bound it with the ancient magic of Three.”

“‘Thrice heard and witnessed’,” Richter echoed in horror, remember the last words he had ever heard on Earth.

“Yes,” Pug affirmed again, but gentler this time. His demeanor eased and he adopted the kindly expression he had had before. Anger was no longer required to help Richter see the truth. His tone was softer, but he did

not protect the chaos seed from the truth. There had been consequences to the choice that had been made.

“The fault does not lie with you alone,” the archetype continued. “Your single Seed of Chaos was not enough to power the entire spellform, though it was enough to ensure your transport. Others had to willingly make the same choice you made. Each of you fed the Dark Court’s spell with the very Chaotic spark that had been passed on to each of you through your bloodline.

“You each chose to leave your lives behind, and, anchored for all eternity by the magic of Three, your choice, which is the very essence of Chaos, gave birth to a spell that could control your entire world. Once it was strong enough, your people could be stolen even if they did not verbally agree as you had. The Court was even able to steal their minds and souls when they were not in the game. Because of your choice, hundreds of millions of humans have come to The Land and have found miracles and nightmares alike.”

Richter sat there reeling from the truth that had been laid out before him. They had done this to themselves. He had done this. He had chosen to leave his loved ones. When he had spoken to the voice in the Castle of Transition, he hadn’t spared a single moment, not a single thought, for his mother, or for his father or brother. He hadn’t spared a single thought... for

her. A single tear fell from his eye.

“As you have already found,” Pug continued as he sat back down, “one more thing was done to you before you arrived in The Land. It was decided that if you and your people were going to have any chance of surviving, you had to be fully committed to your new lives. For that reason, a block was placed in your minds. You would remember your lives on Earth and remember the people you left behind, but you would not be able to access the very emotions that you are struggling with right now.

“Every abductee was altered in a small, but fundamental way, so that you would not try to return home. It was done to make you stronger.” Pug hung his head, and if Richter did not know better, he would have thought the man was feeling shame.

Quiet reigned for nearly a minute before Richter quietly asked, “You made me forget the love I had for my family?”

Pug looked back up, staring the chaos seed in the face, before simply answering, “Yes.”

Richter’s emotions surged again, once again threatening to overwhelm him. Even with whatever the archetype had done before, the chaos seed felt himself drowning once again. His body was overwhelmed by the emotions surging through it. His capacity to process them was met, then

overwhelmed, forcing his body to weep. He stared at the older man, tears tracking down his cheeks, feeling as if he was being torn apart.

“Forgive me,” Pug sighed, “I am blowing your mind.”

The archetype sat forward and placed his hands together. “I know you have many questions. I also know, however, that the effect the answers will have on you might literally be more than you can survive. As it is I expected to have to reconstruct your mind after its having been subjected to the Realm of Chaos for so long, but your mind and soul seem more resilient than they should be. Luckily, I have a solution that will give you your answers and protect your essence. Please remain calm. This might feel... a little weird.” With that, he pulled his hands apart and Richter doubled!

The chaos seed blinked. Both versions of himself. Somehow, in a way he couldn't even begin to understand, he knew there were now two versions of the room he was in, two versions of the archetype, even two version of the soft rug beneath his feet. Additionally, in each room, there was a version of him.

There was another effect to the doubling. The onslaught of emotions each Richter was feeling halved in intensity. Pug nodded to him, then both versions of the archetype placed their hands together again. Pulling them apart a second time, there were suddenly four Richters. The archetype did it

again, and again, and again. Ten times, until there were one thousand and twenty-four versions of Richter, Pug and the wonderfully thick carpet under his feet. With that many copies, the emotional turmoil the chaos seed felt was nothing more than a low burn.

“This will help,” Pug told him. “Your mind will remain connected to the variations of yourself, but the consequences of your questions and the emotional toll that comes with them will be decreased a thousand-fold. Ask your questions.”

So, Richter did. Literally thousands of questions that were burning inside of him, each asked by a different version of himself. He learned that years had indeed passed on Earth since he’d been taken. He learned why the Age of Chaos had needed to come to stop the Dark Court. He learned the consequences of what would happen if either Court ever escaped their prison and why the Lords of Chaos needed him and the other chaos seeds to keep that from ever happening. His eyes were opened and he *knew*!

One by one, the various Richters ran out of questions until the last one fell silent. Each Richter dealt with the emotional repercussions of his individual questions until each had them under control. Once that was done, Pug held his arms wide then slapped them together with a thundering *CLAP*! All one thousand and twenty-four rooms collapsed into one. The one remaining chaos seed grabbed his head in both hands, screaming, but after a

word from Pug, the pain vanished. Once again, the archetype waited for Richter to collect himself.

The chaos seed finally came out of his own head, and noticed that Pug seemed to be wrestling with something himself. Richter looked askance at him, and the archetype made a choice of his own, “I have a function to perform, given to me by the Lords, but I also have free will. I could not be an archetype of Chaos without choice. That is why I choose to give you this knowledge. All chaos seeds were changed in some way by their passage through the Realm, but others, such as yourself, were given special gifts.”

“Why?” More questions spun in Richter’s mind, but he decided simplicity was best.

Pug took a measured breath before continuing, “The Lords did want to protect your Earth, and the chaos seeds that were stolen from it, but they also saw a responsibility to protect The Land from their children. Hundreds of millions of you have left, or will soon leave, the Realm and descend upon that world. The Lords know well that choice allows for the noblest good, but also the most depraved evil. In a very real way, the chaos seeds could become the new apex predators of The Land.”

Richter nodded. He had had that same fear since arriving in The Land, and his experience with Heman obviously supported that concern in

spades. He was fairly confident that not every chaos seed would be like that, but then again, if they were given abilities like Heman's, great power had always had a penchant to corrupt those who used it.

“What did they do to deal with that problem?” Richter asked.

“Because whatever they thought they were doing, they completely fucked up. Heman was a horrible person and I'm pretty sure at some point he'll be reborn to commit even worse atrocities than he's already done. Why didn't the Lords stop him?”

Pug sighed again, “They did. They used you.”

Richter blinked in confusion.

“You, and a select few other chaos seeds, were given abilities and gifts greater than the rest. You were given the potential to become truly powerful.”

“Why? Do you think I'm a saint or something? I promise you I'm not.”

“I know well what you are, Richter. I also know what you have done.” Pug waved a hand and one wall disappeared. In its place was a frozen image of Richter's dragon form standing over Heman's burnt body. The picture unfroze and Richter watched himself torture Heman to death. He saw the glee in his draconian eyes and heard the other chaos seed's cries for

mercy go unanswered.

Richter watched the entire sequence, then turned to Pug, ready to defend himself and his actions. The man had tortured him. He'd been a monster! So, what if Richter had enjoyed the payback? He wasn't a bad person! He protected people!

The chaos seed was ready to shout all of that and more, but the expression on Pug's face was not accusing. The archetype was not preparing to verbally attack Richter, he was looking at him in pity.

"You were not selected because you are a good person, Richter. You were selected because you have a darkness inside of you. While you are not blatantly evil like Heman, you love battle and challenge. It is remarkable how you have channeled the beast within you, but it does not change what you are. You push at boundaries that were never meant to be crossed and ignore the consequences. You are someone who seeks power almost as fiercely as you seek freedom. You built a village and accumulate monuments that cannot help but invite challenge. Richter," Pug spoke his name gently, "you were not selected to save other chaos seeds. In The Land your people could become horrible predators. The Lords needed a monster to hunt them."

Richter was flooded with emotions once again. He didn't know what he was feeling. He'd been selected to kill other chaos seeds? Did that make

him worse? Did that make him evil? There was no way he could make sense of the tumult, so he defaulted to anger, “You’re saying I’m supposed to kill the people that were brought to The Land? And what? I have to be a horrible monster to do it?”

“No,” Pug told him, unfazed by the chaos seed’s anger. “You have a choice. You can choose a life of peace. The Lords would never infringe upon that. You have a choice.”

“Then why are you looking at me with all that pity?” Richter cried out to him.

“Because when you were given the option to be a man or a monster,” Pug turned toward the wall showing his dragon form slowly killing Heman, “you made your choice.” The archetype waved his hand again and the wall became simple brown wood once more.

The two of them sat in silence as Richter digested what had been said. He still wanted to yell and scream that it wasn’t his fault, that Pug didn’t understand, but he remembered how good it had felt to make Heman suffer just a bit of the pain he had visited on others. Even now, he wanted to smile at the memory. Maybe it was for the best, he decided. Not every soldier for good could have wings. Some needed to be able to live in the shadows. Only there could they serve the light. Maybe not shadows, he

realized. Shadows weren't the only thing that could hide you. Maybe he had always been fated to walk the line between good and evil, light and dark. Maybe he had always been fated to walk in the mists.

The two men sat for longer than Richter realized, but ultimately Pug let him know what came next, "Your life is on pause right now. No time has passed in The Land despite how it has felt. We are now at your true moment of Choice."

"True moment of choice?" Richter echoed.

"Yes," Pug told him. "None of your people have ever made their way back into the Realm of Chaos without dying. It was thought to be impossible. You have only done so through an interplay of powerful magics. The likelihood of this one eventuality occurring was so unlikely among all the eventualities of the infinite curve that it was not properly accounted for. It was a glitch, if you will, that has now been corrected.

"Once you awaken, this entire experience will feel like a lucid dream, and, as with all dreams, many of the details will be lost immediately upon waking and the rest will fade over time. In the end, all that will remain will be vague resonances buried in the deepest parts of your unconscious. And while it is true that each death will bring you back to the Realm, never again should your conscious mind perceive it unless you are invited."

Richter nodded, wondering where this was going. It felt like an ending.

“While some of the Lords wished to destroy you utterly for the impertinence of invading their home, it was decided due to your **CHOICE** of Freedom being your core value and your status as the Catalyst of the Age of Chaos, that you would be given a Choice instead. You may now return to Earth.” Pug said it so gently that for a moment it didn’t even register to Richter. When he looked at the kindly looking older man though, the archetype nodded gently.

With a simple gesture of Pug’s arm, a portal of black crystal filled with a brilliant green energy field appeared against one wall. Richter’s heart began thudding painfully as the archetype continued to speak, “You may leave The Land to its own fate, knowing that no matter what happens, it will not affect the Earth until your grandchildren die of old age. You must know, however, that the actions the Lords were forced to take to protect your world from the Courts have changed it. Things will be... very different now, and your life may not be the same.”

The archetype helped him to his feet and walked him over to one wall. Placing his hand upon it, he pushed, “Or, you may choose the world out there.”

The wall fell away and The Land was revealed. The two of them were hovering high above the planet. So high that Richter could see the curve of the planet while it rotated beneath them. Even at that height, he could still see every mother holding her son and every monster consuming an innocent. He saw a world of adventure and danger, love and betrayal, power and wonder. A world that held his village and the hundreds of people who relied upon him. A world that held his village. A world that held Sion... a world that held Alma.

The seven faces of the Lords of Chaos appeared in a rotating circle, floating between him and Pug and directly between the portal and the view of The Land, Pug gestured to them, “Your panel of observers await your decision.”

Richter looked back into the room at the portal that could lead him to Earth, then looked back down at the world turning beneath his feet. He felt pulled in both directions and finally asked the one question he had not had the courage to ask before. To ask about the only other person who could possibly have been a fragment of his soul as well, “Is she down there, in The Land?”

Pug looked at him with profound sympathy and understanding, but slowly shook his head, “Your Choice must be yours alone and cannot be influenced by the Choice of another. I cannot tell you the answer to your

question, but I can tell you this. To know your true path, you must simply ask yourself this: what is happiness to you, Richter?”

Richter thought about his life on Earth. He had been happy. He had been successful. He had even been loved, but... he had been less than he was now. Each day had bled into the next. It was a life others dreamed of, but it had felt that way, just a happy dream. Not one day had ever felt as real, as pure, as even his most dangerous times in The Land. Even though Pug had removed the block on his emotions and he missed his family terribly, he also thought of his friendship with Sion, his love for Alma and even his frustrations with Roswan, all memories that brought a faint smile to his face. Despite the danger and pain, every moment he had spent in The Land he had felt alive!

Walking back to the portal, he laid one hand on the black stone. Then he looked at Pug, “I want to live a real life. I don’t want to dream any longer.”

The archetype smiled, “I wish you well, Richter.”

The chaos seed ran to the edge of the room and dove off. As he fell, the seven faces of the Lords of Chaos rushed forward to revolve around him like planets around a sun. They whispered to him as he plummeted to his destiny.

“People often hate and oppose us because our methods cause destruction, but it is necessary,” one began.

“But what is existence without change?” another continued.

“Some must die and make room, so that new life can grow. You, our servant, must return.”

As Richter fell, his “body” was stripped away, leaving only his core. His seed sank through the Sea of Chaos and was nourished. If ever he would find completion it would be here. Despite that, the small wisp of chaos cried its choice to leave the perfection of the fathomless possibility of the Sea in order to serve its Lords and embrace its choice.

“You have said so before,” stated a face of pure anger.

“And will again,” continued a face of mocking laughter.

“A thousand times a thousand times you have stood before us. You will know us. We make ourselves known as jewels in the night.”

“Always hated in the moment, but cherished for centuries to come.”

“We are the agents of inevitable change.”

“It is our words that drive you, our most loyal child.”

All seven faces spoke as one, “First of All, Servants of All, we shall transcend all.”

“I love you, my lords!” the spark called out in a quiet voice as loud as the creation of all things.

“Yes,” they intoned, accepting everything that Richter could give. There was no gentleness, chaos could not afford it, but there was a sense of unity in their acceptance. They continued speaking as one, “And now you must forget. Forget us, forget your comfort, forget your sense of belonging. Feel the need for more, the hunger, the desire, for that is what drives you. Forget us, and forget what you have sacrificed in your old life. Question everything but your place in The Land. Remember, the way is forward, never back.”

“LIVE!”

CHAPTER 94 – Day 149 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



“-ter!” Alma cried, before looking at him in confusion. Richter was standing before her with a smile on his face and love in his eyes.

What happened? she asked, panic still in her voice. **That grey tear sucked you in and you vanished, but now you’re here an instant later!**

“I-,” he began, then realized he didn’t know himself. The answer was right there, at the tip of his mind, but the more he chased it, the farther it retreated. Ultimately, he just had to shake his head, “I’m not sure, my love, but...” he looked at the pyramid that was now fading from view, “I don’t think we have anything to fear from that anymore.”

But what happened? she asked again.

Richter screwed up his face, still trying to remember, but each flash of memory he snatched at broke apart like ash on the wind. He had a vague remembrance of a kindly old man. Then his conscious mind recoiled from the images: they were so alien, and deep inside of him there was a knot of

pure sorrow he subconsciously decided that he just didn't have time to deal with. He forced it down even deeper. It would have to be dealt with later.

"I survived," he pronounced after a few moments. It was the only thing he knew definitively. He looked at her in love and gratitude, "because of you." Then he remembered that though things looked fine in the mindscape, in the real world, time was passing. When the Messeji ended, he would once again be stuck in the forest, blinded and with a broken jaw. He had to get back to the village and seek help before that happened. Even without that countdown hanging over his head, he was still in the middle of the forest alone, and the scent of blood on the air might attract monsters.

Richter focused his consciousness on the real world. He was still kneeling over Heman's body and only seconds had passed since the man had died. The claws of his right hand remained embedded in his enemy's chest. After he removed them, with a faint sucking sound, Richter's forked tongue snaked out almost of its own accord. It licked the blood coating his talons, and his dragon body enjoyed a moment of pure pleasure at the taste of his foe's spent life.

A moment later, he shook himself out of the feeling and looked at his hand in shock. Had he really just done that? There was still so much he didn't know about the Messeji, but he couldn't let it turn him into something he wasn't. Richter looked around, in control once more, and took stock of

the situation. Just as he had thought would happen, Heman's interdimensional cubby had disappeared with the chaos seed's death. He allowed himself a chuckle, hoping the bastard enjoyed the parting gift Richter had left him. That dark humor was just as bestial as tasting the blood, but this time he didn't even try to pretend that the impulse wasn't pure him.

He searched the ground, hoping to find something left behind by the slain lightning demon, but just like with his own summonings, nothing was left behind after death. Richter had always wondered if there might be a way to summon creatures, kill them and then harvest their components. That would be very useful knowledge to have. The chaos seed shrugged; it was knowledge he didn't have yet.

Seeing nothing else of import, he pulled Heman's body into a fireman's carry, and stood. Richter began casting. Tendrils of mist rose from the ground and formed a bubble ten feet wide. Nine seconds later, he appeared outside of the Dungeon mouth. One new guard shouted, "Demon!" and raised his sword to attack, but he was quickly cuffed by his squad leader. The senior guard recognized her lord, and clapped her fist to her chest in salute.

Richter just nodded and took off at a sprint towards the village gate. Heman's corpse flopped around over his shoulder, but he didn't let such a minor consideration delay him. The guards at the gate also had a negative

reaction when he ran up, most of them not knowing about their lord's new dragon form, but Terrod had made sure every squad leader was notified, so the misunderstanding was quickly resolved. Futen floated up while he ran to the healer's hut and then left just as quickly to find Randolphus, as ordered.

"What is this?" Sumiko shouted when he entered with the dead body. The Healer guarded her domain of the Healer's Hut just as religiously as Krom guarded the Forge of Heavens.

Richter, keeping one eye on the counter for his Messeji, recounted what had happened in the thirty seconds he had left. He started to tell her of the injuries he and Alma had suffered before she snapped at him for wasting time.

"I do not need your paltry reporting. I need to know exactly what I will be healing. Make a psychic bond and show me." The crack in her voice left no room for refusal. Richter looked her in the eyes, and at the speed of thought shared the fight with Heman, including the damage Alma had suffered. He stopped the playback after his breath attack though. Richter didn't want her to see what he had done to Heman, though the man's injuries probably already told most of the tale.

In his last seconds in the bond, he told her, "I need you to examine his body, in the same way you examined the gha'st's."

She looked at him sharply, but in the face of his draconian visage and harsh tone, Sumiko forewent her usual waspishness and just nodded, “By your will, Lord Mist.”

“Give the leftover pieces to Tabia,” he added coldly. In a softer voice he gave one more command, “Heal Alma first.”

Before Sumiko could respond to that, his Messeji ended. Blue-white light left his body in a rush, coalescing into a ball in front of him. Richter’s skin softened, his teeth blunted and his face became human once again. Unfortunately, his injuries reappeared as well. His left orbital bone fractured, his eyes suffered major contusions and his jaw shattered. The cumulative pain returning all at once made him drop to his knees. It was all he could do not to howl as the healers lifted him onto a cot. Then Sumiko’s healing energy flowed into him, numbing the pain and beginning the first of several delicate spells required to restore his sight.

His Luck showed up again when he lapsed into unconsciousness.

When Richter woke, he was in his own bed. He slowly opened his eyes, relieved that he could see again. He also worked his jaw from side to side, but there wasn’t even a click. A familiar weight on his chest made him look down, and he was even more relieved that his familiar lay there, completely healed. She didn’t even have her wings wrapped this time.

Clearly Sumiko was more comfortable healing the dragonling the second time around.

After scratching her scaled head lovingly, he looked around and saw several people were waiting on him, but it was Randolphus who spoke first. The chamberlain collapsed to his knees. His voice was raw with ragged emotion, “I failed you. I failed you again!” Richter looked at him in confusion. “Sumiko told me that you were attacked by one of the new villagers. A villager that I allowed to stay here. I swear to you that I will repay this debt.”

“Breathe, man,” Richter told him. “There are things you don’t know.” Taking stock of who was at his bedside, he didn’t see anyone he couldn’t trust. Hisako, Sumiko, Sion and Randolphus had all been waiting for him to wake up. He told them the entire story. When he finished, he looked at his chamberlain, “So you see, he was one of my people. He had abilities that would have fooled even you.”

“I was going to apologize as well, my lord,” Sumiko told him, “for failing to detect his duplicity with my *Soul Window* spell. After seeing how powerful you are, however, I can understand why another of your people, another... chaos seed,” she spoke the name of his race hesitantly, unsure how she felt about it, “might be able to fool even my tier-five spell.” She turned to Randolphus, “What I do not understand is why *you* believe you should

have seen through his duplicity.” Neither she, Hisako nor Sion knew his true nature as a Spy. The chamberlain just shook his head and looked to the side.

“Did you learn anything from the body?” Richter asked.

“No,” Sumiko answered, shaking her head. “There are not many half-gnome, half-humans that I have heard of, but his anatomy showed nothing that I didn’t expect.”

Richter shook his head, “So there is no way to detect another chaos seed by their body alone?”

“Not unless the identifying mark leaves at the time of death,” Sumiko concurred.

The chaos seed nodded, “Well, hopefully Tabia can find something useful to do with his remains.”

“About that, Lord Richter,” Sumiko began, “I do not like the idea of handing bodies over to your alchemist for experimentation. It smacks of evil.”

He fixed her with an almost callous glare, “We are at war, Sumiko, and we will use every tool at our disposal to survive. If you cannot accept that fact, then I will accept your resignation as village Healer. There will be many more choices and acts we must all commit to before this is done. Let me know now if you are not up to the task!”

Randolphus, Sion and even Hisako remained silent. Sumiko looked back at him, stunned and momentarily at a loss for words, but ultimately replied, “I stand with you, Lord Mist.”

Richter let out a breath he hadn’t even known he was holding. He had meant every word he had just spoken, but there was no part of him that actually wanted to face the days to come without Sumiko. “Good. Now, I assume not much time has passed, seeing as how you all look calm and there is a battle on the horizon, but what exactly has been going on while I took my little nap?”

He had been right about the time. Only six hours had passed while he was unconscious. Night had fallen, but the evening meal was only now being served to his villagers. That was a relief. He still had Settlement Points to spend and would have been in an even worse mood than before if Heman’s betrayal had made him waste them. Thankfully, other than finalizing the assault plans for the morning, nothing else had happened in the village.

“Are you hale enough to hear it?” Hisako asked.

Sitting up in his bed, Richter nodded.

Hisako and Sumiko had both been studying the bone that triggered the eldritch portal magic in detail for days. They had confirmed it could open a short-lived portal that anyone could step through, presumably to arrive back

at the Mausoleum.

“Presumably?” Richter asked.

“Yes,” Hisako answered. “Most of our information stems from the ghaſt’s memory. Taking it at face value makes ſeveral aſſumptions, not the leaſt of which is that everything the lich ſaid was true.”

Nodding ſourly, he motioned for her to continue.

“Though the portal is meant to cloſe ſhortly after one perſon walks through, I believe Sumiko and I can keep it open and even enlarge it.”

“How?” Richter asked. “I thought you couldn’t affect eldritch magic. You even need the decaemur knight to activate it.”

“It is true that we cannot trigger the ſpell, but remember, eldritch magic is paraſitic. It is always a perversion of another Power. The portal bone is created in large part by corrupted Life and Air magic. It has taken ſeveral days, but I am now fairly confident that I can keep the portal open for ſhort a time.”

“‘Fairly confident?’” Richter repeated.

“I have not told you the worſt part yet.”

“Well by all means, let’s get to the ‘worſt’ part!”

She looked at him, ſeriously conſidering ſlapping the taſte out of his

mouth, but seeing as he had recently been tortured, she decided to let his tone pass. “The problem is, you were correct. I cannot fully access the magic in the finger bone, so the portal will be unstable. The more people that pass through, the more unstable it will become. If that instability gets to a certain point, the portal could collapse, explode or connect to another realm filled with horrors beyond our imagining.”

It was dead quiet in Richter’s bedroom while everyone digested that information.

Sion was the one who broke the silence, “This is the only plan we have, correct?”

“Yes,” came Hisako’s succinct answer.

“Then I suppose it’s worth the risk,” he concluded with false cheer.

Richter rolled his eyes at his best friend, but knew he was right, “If the portal becomes more unstable with every person that walks through it, then will the same thing be true when we try to come back?”

“Yes,” Hisako said again.

This time it was Randolphus who spoke up, “That means, once 50% of the spell’s stability is gone we cannot send anyone else through, or some of those already attacking will be unable to return. Are you sure you will be able to gauge that point?”

“Roughly,” she admitted.

Richter screwed his eyes shut and rubbed his forehead. This was getting better and better! “You know what! Just lie to me sometimes, Hisako!”

“I’m eighty, no, ninety percent sure I will know,” she told him. “It is not only the number of people we send that will affect the instability, however. The time the portal remains open will also be a factor. Everyone not involved in the attack will need to lend me their magic so I can keep it open as long as possible, but sooner or later, the portal will close.”

Richter nodded. He had assumed she would use the special perk of her Life Mastery to draw upon the mana of others. “Can you give us any kind of estimate?”

“Not before the first of you go through the portal,” she told him.

“So basically,” he said in a speculative tone, “we are going to be invading the stronghold of a parasitic magic user, via an unstable wormhole, that might open into hell itself at any moment, and every person we send through on this raid increases the chance that none of us will make it back. Is that about it?”

“I do not know what a wormhole is, but the rest sound fairly correct,” Hisako told him.

“Any other bad news?”

“Yes,” she answered promptly. Richter looked at her like she had just betrayed him, “The magic of the portal will destabilize faster the more other magics come in contact with it. That means I cannot send any summoned creatures with you and you cannot cast any buffs on your troops until you land. Having active spells pass through the portal might cause unexpected side effects.”

The chaos seed sighed heavily, “What about enchantments? Will the enchanted weapons and armor we’ll be carrying cause a problem?”

“I do not believe so as those are self-contained magical vessels, but again, this is all a best guess. We will not know until it is time for the battle. Which brings us to the next topic. We have only discussed half of the battle, however: the attack. We must also prepare for hostile forces. Not only would they destabilize the portal as soon as they cross the threshold of the portal, but high level undead are a danger in and of themselves. The forces we leave here must remain on high alert.”

“Well, I have one piece of good news on that front,” Richer stated, then he filled them in on how the Dungeon owed him a favor. “If we open the portal in the Dungeon, we can send its monsters through as a first wave and we won’t need to worry about bringing them back. The other bonus of

the Dungeon owing me a favor is that if any undead do manage to make it back through to our side, they'll still be trapped inside the Dungeon. If the worst comes to pass, at least neither of our settlements will be put at risk."

"Are you sure it will follow your direction? It was born of a Bloodstone," Hisako asked dubiously.

It was Richter's turn to shrug, "Only one way to find out. Now, my next question is, just how big can you make the portal?"

"I should be able to enlarge it for a short time, though that might worsen the instability. Why?"

"Welllll," Richter began, filling her in on his plans for his new pet. "I'll be entering the portal first with the tovuut mauler. That big bastard should be able to slice and dice even the high level undead. I have to make this clear, however. No matter what happens, the tovuut mauler cannot cross back through the portal. I would need to tame it more than three hundred times to keep it loyal forever. I doubt I would even manage it once more."

Everyone nodded their understanding and they moved on to the next topic. They talked for another hour, ironing out details like having teams of five prepared to dash into the portal one at a time, Hisako weighing the instability they caused each time. Richter finally bid them goodnight. Sumiko had done a wonderful job with his healing, but both the injuries and

the powerful magic had taken a toll on him. As everyone filed out for the night, he raised one hand and asked Sion to stay. Soon, only the sprite and his familiar remained.

“What is it, man?” Sion asked.

Looking at his friend, Richter finally allowed that knot of emotion he’d pushed down after returning from Heman’s memory to rise. He still had no real memory of what had happened, but despite that, the spiritual wounds were as real as if he’d been cut by a blade. As unshed tears filled Richter’s eyes, Alma looked up at her master in love and concern.

Sion walked closer until he was standing right in front of Richter, “Are you alright, my friend?”

Richter didn’t answer. Not with words. Instead, his newly healed jaw shook as he refused to let an audible sob leave his mouth. He would not allow for even the possibility that the guard stationed outside of the door might find out that their lord, the man they relied on to be larger than life, might actually just be human.

With Sion though, his brother and the man he trusted above any other, he let his tears flow. Without words, for he did not consciously understand why he was feeling this pain, he shared his fears and his sorrow. He wept for his new world. He wept for the stillborn world that might have been, a world

where the chaos seeds could have brought the best parts of their humanity to The Land. Not the worst. He mourned for the countless innocents that would be lost as a plague worse than eaters descended on this world. The plague of his people, a plague of chaos, a plague of predators.

Sion rested his hand on his friend's shoulder and did what he could to ease his pain, but he did not hope to understand what was happening because Richter himself did not understand. A true Companion, he stood by his brother, as the chaos seed wept confused tears for the oceans of blood that would be spilled and the mountains of innocents that would be slain. His soul knew what his mind did not, and remembered the horrors he had been showed in the Realm of Chaos. His spirit knew it could not stop what was to come, so it did the only thing it could, it cleansed itself with his pain, and every tear washed away some of the filth it had accumulated from asking questions to Pug that Richter's mind, body and soul all wished they could forget. So far, only his mind had been that lucky, though there would one day be consequences for that as well.

For long minutes Richter wept, because his heart now knew that his people were not only the latest Cataclysm to come to The Land, they were the worst, and quite possibly the last. He cried every tear that he would ever shed over the role that he himself would play. After today, even his heart would forget what had happened in the Realm of Chaos and he could

continue his life in blissful ignorance. It was only now, in this moment, that he could pity himself and weep over what he must become to deal with these predators that were being sent to The Land.

He silently wept for the loss of his innocence, and unbeknownst to Sion, or even his soul familiar, the monster in his heart exulted in his pain. A monster that had always been there, but had been fettered. Now it fed on his tears and his sadness, growing strong as it shook the chains that Richter had always placed upon it. In this world of chaos seeds, it grinned and looked out through Richter's eyes, dreaming of its freedom and envisioning the many predators it would feast upon before the end.

For what else could hunt a predator, but a monster?

CHAPTER 95 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



Sion sat next to his friend until he fell asleep. He was still confused at what had overtaken Richter, but he was well familiar with the hidden wounds battle could inflict on one's heart. A part of him feared there was something more to it, but he contented himself with being a good friend. Once Richter's breathing eased with the peace of sleep, he left, leaving Alma to watch over her master. The dragonling lay on her master's chest, filled with love, but also filled with sorrow that she could not take away his pain.

Though Richter was still heartsore from the truths he had learned in the Realm of Chaos, even his soul had begun to forget what had transpired there. His attribute-enhanced body also did not need much sleep, especially when he wore his Belt of Sustenance. The *rare* item greatly decreased his basic need for rest and food. He was awoken by Futen, and even though he was pretty sure not more than a few hours could have passed, he felt refreshed.

“My lord, Smith Krom requests your presence,” the remnant intoned in his deadpan voice.

Standing, he looked around, testing his eyesight once more. He also slowly opened and closed his mouth. Both worked fine as far as he could tell. He really was lucky to have Sumiko as the village Healer. That made him feel bad for a minute over how he had spoken to her the night before, but he still stood by his decision. Richter would always encourage his people to speak up and question, but when it was crunch time, they needed to know that his word was law.

He focused on Futen, “Is it urgent?”

“The Smith said he would like your presence as soon as possible, my lord, though he said it more colorfully.”

Richter let out a small huffing laugh. So not immediately, but ASAP. He threw some clothes on and Alma jumped onto his shoulders. He needed to make it to the Forge anyway. Opening the door to this room, the guard stationed outside saluted sharply. Richter clapped him on the shoulder and told him to get some rest. The man hesitated, clearly not wanting to risk Caulder’s wrath by leaving his post early, so Richter made it easy for him, “That’s an order, soldier.”

The man snapped to attention once more, then smiled ruefully at his

lord before thanking him and walking off to find his bed. Richter peeked into Sion's room and saw his friend fast asleep with his new gnome bedmate. He winked at his Companion and thought, "That's right bud, show her gnomercy." Chuckling to himself, he made his way to the treasury. He had to cross the Great Seal to get there and he returned the salutes of the other guards stationed in that room. They were not only there to monitor the seal, but also to make sure that nothing malevolent made its way up from the lower floors of the catacombs.

The magic of his Place of Power was supposed to keep that from happening, but he'd finally learned the lesson that nothing was ever absolute in The Land. Even an infinite power might be opposed by another one. Richter stopped walking, wondering where that thought had come from, but couldn't place it. Shrugging, he made his way to the treasury.

The bolts slid back from the massive door at his mental command. Walking inside, Richter deposited the treasure he had "appropriated" from Heman. He definitely didn't consider it stealing seeing as how they were the spoils of war. Besides, he thought to himself with a smile, he'd left something in trade.

As he turned to leave, he made a mental note to tell Randy about the influx in village cash. That was when he saw a clipboard hanging by the door. It definitely hadn't been there before he had given his chamberlain

access to the treasury. When he read the top page, he couldn't help but chuckle.

Please log all additions or removals from the Treasury. (Including you, my lord.)

Richter shook his head and unstopped the inkwell that had been left conveniently nearby. He listed the weights, bands, gold crowns, silver marks and copper shills; all adding up to five hundred eighteen gold and change. Below that, he added the large emerald ring that he'd deposited. There was no doubt in his mind that Randy would get the Jeweler to assess it and determine the gem's clarity and carats soon.

After leaving the treasury, he made his way outside. A star-filled sky met his gaze and the blue moon Aquiel hung prominent in the west. Richter could also see a crescent of the purple-black moon Nevuur hanging to the north. Mist lights hung over the village, giving it an ethereal glow. As late as the hour was, a ringing note still split the night, the pounding of a hammer on an anvil. Smiling, Richter took off at a jog.

While he did, he dealt with the prompts he'd gained from his battle with Heman. The first one turned his stomach.

*Know This! You have killed another **Chaos Seed**! You are the 107,499th member of your race to have done such a thing. Welcome to the slaughter!*

Richter blinked. He was one of the first chaos seeds to have come to The Land, at least that was what Xuetrix had told him. If the imp had been truthful, that meant in just five months over one hundred thousand of his people had started killing others of their race. Remembering how good it had felt to take Heman's Chaos Points, he realized that whatever had sent them all to The Land must have set it up this way. They had turned murder into a drug!

He shook his head. His life had just become even more dangerous. After heaving a deep sigh, he let the worry go. There was nothing he could do about it now. He just had to grow stronger. Richter went through the rest of his prompts.

*Know This! As you have used a **Chaotic blade** to slay your enemy, you not only destroyed Heman's current life, but an additional rebirth as well.*

*Know This! The Chaos Seed you killed, Heman, had killed another fifteen Chaos Seeds and had stolen **416** Chaos Points. He spent **126**, leaving **290** in his Chaos Pool to be collected by you.*

*Know This! When a Chaos Seed is slain by another of their own kind, you may absorb Chaos Points from their death. Each death your victim suffered beforehand increases the innate Chaotic energy they possessed. You have gained **9** Chaos Points from the slaughter of Heman.*

Know This! Your Blessing from the Lords of Chaos has greatly increased the Chaos Points you have earned!

*You have gained a total of **598 Chaos Points** from slaying your kinsman.*

*Total Chaos Points: **682***

If Heman had been telling the truth, a big if, Richter realized, then the Chaos Points he just gained would have been doubled if it had been his final death. They hadn't been, which meant the homicidal maniac would be reborn one day soon.

As unsettling as that thought was, he had just gained an *insane* amount of Chaos Points. There was also another prompt that stole his attention.

Know This! You have accumulated enough Chaos Points to force your way into the next stratum of the Sea of Chaos. Would you like to spend 500 Chaos Points to access the third stratum? You have seven seconds to decide.

7, 6, ...

Fuck! Richter hated these fucking timers! Gritting his teeth at the high cost of five hundred CPs, he still took the offer. That was a shit ton of Chaos Points, but every level he was able to get to in the Sea of Chaos offered such awesome stuff. He even thought he might have found a trend. The first level of the stratum had offered *uncommon*, or second-tier items.

The third level seemed to usually have *scarce* items, though there might be offerings more or less rare as well. If he was right, the fourth stratum might have an average rank of *rare*! Either way, the adventurer in him just had to see what the next stratum offered. He made his choice.

*For making a Choice in the allotted time you are awarded: **2 Chaos points.***

*Total Chaos Points: **184***

*Congratulations! You have purchased access to the **3rd** stratum of the Sea of Chaos! Due to the Blessing of the Lords of Chaos, you may access one stratum deeper than you normally could and so have access to the **4th** stratum as well! Each level has more powerful offerings but they are also more expensive. Would you like to access the Sea of Chaos? Yes or No?*

He had been able to access the first two stratums because of his two points of chaotic nature. It appeared that was not the only way to dive deeper into the Sea of Chaos. He, and presumably other chaos seeds, could buy their way into various strata as well. Just another reminder that there was always more than one way to get things done, in The Land or any world. The question facing him now was if he should hoard his Chaos Points until he had enough points to buy his way into the fourth stratum?

Richter thought about it for a moment, then decided no. He had no idea how much it would cost, but it was a safe bet that the next level would

cost substantially more. It could cost a thousand points or more. He couldn't wait for that. Not when he only earned eight Chaos Points a level. The Dungeon could give him more points if it dropped another particle as loot, but that still only gave one or two CPs at a time. He also didn't think chaotic particles would be dropping too often. It was time to dive back into the sea.

He really wished he had another Potion of Selak's Luck, but he'd used the last during the Dungeon battle. Hoping the perk from the kindir was enough to give him good options, Richter chose "Yes."

*You have accessed the **Sea of Chaos**. The Sea contains everything that was, is, or could be. Choose wisely, for you may choose the Catalyst for your own death and salvation.*

You may reach the 1st stratum at a cost of 1 Chaos point.

You may reach the 2nd stratum at a cost of 3 Chaos points.

You may reach the 3rd stratum at a cost of 5 Chaos points.

You may reach the 4th stratum at a cost of 7 Chaos points.

Which level do you wish to access?

Richter chose the fourth.

Total Chaos Points: 177

4th STRATUM OFFERINGS

Offering	Chaotic Cost	Traits
Eyes of a Death God	49 points	Purchasing this allows you to know how many respawns other Chaos Seeds have once you have learned their true nature.
Scroll of the Nine Tail	58 points	Summons a truly powerful creature to fight on your behalf for the duration of one battle
Tree of the Senzu	63 points	Provides a sapling that will grow senzu beans. These beans have great restorative powers and can completely restore a creature's health, mana and stamina instantly. Normally produces four beans per year.

Know This! No purchase is required. This window may be dismissed at any time, but it will last no longer than 7 minutes, sometimes less. The purchase price of accessing this level cannot be retrieved. Each time a stratum of the Sea of Chaos is accessed, the offerings are randomized and may never come again.

There was something about these options that tickled the back of Richter's mind, but he couldn't figure it out. He also didn't have time to try. These options would be gone in seven minutes, and if he didn't choose something, then the seven Chaos Points he had used to reveal them would be up in smoke as well. Though seeing the cost of the fourth stratum options, he

knew there might come a time where he just ate the access cost rather than blow entire levels' worth of points on a bad choice.

These three options were all interesting, however. *Eyes of a Death God* wouldn't help him identify other chaos seeds unfortunately, but he had his ability, Feel of Chaos, to help with that somewhat at least. If it wasn't for his ability, he might never have known Heman was a chaos seed at all. The man might still have been in the village, worming his way through Richter's home like a cancer.

Scroll of the Nine Tail apparently summoned a powerful beast, which could always be good. The fact that it lasted an entire battle made it superior to summoned creatures who disappeared as soon as the spell time elapsed, some only staying for five minutes. The downside was that it could only be used once. There were no other details, but "truly powerful" was a hell of a descriptor.

The *Tree of the Senzu* was intriguing. If it really did replenish every one of his stats instantly, that could be amazing, but it only made four beans a year. With the bonus from his Bounty of Life ability, that should go up to five, he reasoned. The boost from the Quickening and Isabella's spell, *Virol's Blessing*, could also increase the yield of each bean by 130%. He had no idea how that would work, either growing two beans in a pod instead of one or maybe just making them bigger, but all in all, he could increase the

yearly “dose” from four to eleven or twelve. It made the option more tempting, but he already had the Dragon’s Cauldron to heal him. The potions weren’t instantaneous, but they still restored over four hundred health, mana and stamina each. He was sure that, in time, Tabia would figure out even stronger formulas. While the senzu beans were tempting, the tree just wasn’t worth the sixty-three Chaos Points. He wasn’t a super saiyan after all.

Richter looked over the other two choices, but ultimately decided on *Eyes of a Death God*. He wished it would show his own number of respawns, and it would have been nice if it showed who was a chaos seed when he first saw them, but it was becoming clear that something was protecting the identity of chaos seeds. His *Analyze* skill was *rare*, yet still Heman had only registered as a half-gnome, half-human. Richter needed all the information about other chaos seeds that he could get. At least with *Eyes of a Death God*, if he had to kill another chaos seed, he would know how many more times he’d have to kill them in the future.

He made his purchase.

Total Chaos Points: 128

For once, there wasn’t any pain. His eyes just felt “funny.” Richter used his Light magic to summon a mirror. What looked back at him was his face but with glowing red eyes. After a few moments, they faded away and

his normal visage looked back. God, he thought, I really hope that doesn't happen every time I try to use them. I looked like a goddamn demon.

Richter didn't even stop and think about it, he accessed the sea again and dove straight to the fourth stratum.

Total Chaos Points: 121

4 TH STRATUM OFFERINGS		
Offering	Chaotic Cost	Traits
Tear of the Rainbow	51 points	"In a time of darkest night, the bearer of this tear may find their way to salvation."
Silver Harp	53 points	The haunting melody of this harp forces even the strands of fate to bend their ear. Playing this instrument may cause momentous events to occur nearby. It can be used three times before it will be destroyed.
Fairy Water	52 points	Sprinkle this upon the ground and a ring of toadstools will appear. Under the right conditions, this may offer transport to a random fey realm. The potential portal will also slowly increase the ambient magic of the surrounding lands.

The customary warning that the options would disappear in seven minutes or less followed his three choices. Richter dismissed it, barely

noticing. He had no idea what any of these were really worth. Again, he felt like he was missing something, some common thread binding the three offerings, but he didn't know what so he just focused on his choices. The Silver Harp appealed to the adventurer in him, but honestly, momentous things were already happening around him all the time. He could use a vacation.

One of the other options was the Tear of the Rainbow. What was he supposed to do with that trait description? "Salvation" was always a good thing, but what did "darkest night" mean? Did that mean that whatever the tear was that it would only work at night, but not if there was a moon in the sky? If so, that was kind of a crap qualifier seeing as how The Land had seven moons, and anyway, he had never been a fan of riddles. The last option didn't seem that great either. All he remembered from stories back on Earth about fairies was that they couldn't really be trusted. Not the Disney ones, the old-world stories. They always described creatures that stole children and delighted in torturing mortals. Not really the kind of creatures he wanted running around his forest. Richter was getting ready to just chalk these seven points up as a loss, but then he read the last prompt again, a random "fey" realm. A smile crossed his face. Elementum!

Richter made his purchase and a grey disc appeared in midair. Reaching through, his hand found something with the texture of smooth

glass. He pulled it into the world, and saw he was holding a rose sculpted from pure crystal. It was hollow, and the interior held a liquid that shifted from red to orange to purple depending on how it caught the light. His *Identify Talent* triggered.

You have found: Fairy Water	Alchemy Class: Epic Alchemy Level: Philter Alchemy Strength: Pure Durability: 2/2 Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Pouring this upon the ground will create a toadstool ring. Under the right circumstances, this can open a passageway to a random fey realm. This will also allow fey magic to seep into the surrounding area, increasing the ambient magic level.
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Total Chaos Points: 69

Richter had been hoping his theory about each stratum was right, but it looked like his guess might have been too modest. He'd thought this stratum would have *rare*, fifth-tier, items, but the pink background of the status window only came with the sixth rank. This was an *epic* potion! He never even seen a potion with a *philter* level or *pure* strength!

The container that held it was so delicate that Richter immediately and carefully placed it into his Bag of Holding. The prompt remained in his

vision and, rereading it, he had a wonderful idea. While he didn't want any fey creatures running around his village or forest, at least until he learned more about them, there was one place where he wanted as much battle fodder as possible. The toadstool ring would be the perfect addition to his Dungeon. Richter still didn't fully understand the importance of an area's ambient mana increasing, but if the ring of magic mushrooms continually leaked fey magic into the Dungeon, it just might fulfill its *Limitless Power* motivation and unlock a new Power in the barrow! Richter shook his head with a smile. The fourth stratum was awesome!

While he was spending his Chaos Points, he'd made it to smithy. From the flickering fire light and ringing of metal, Richter knew someone was working in the Forge of Heavens. He decided to wait out in the darkness of the night for a few more minutes. By his estimation, he should have just enough points to dive into the fourth stratum again and make a purchase. So far, he'd only gotten things that could help in the long term. He was hoping that this last dive into the Sea of Chaos would help in the coming battle.

Total Chaos Points: 62

4 th STRATUM OFFERINGS		
Offering	Chaotic Cost	Traits
Weapon Schematic	55 points	Provides an <i>innovative</i> (4 th Tier) Schematic for either a mace, sword or bow. Only a Professed

		Smith can construct these weapons.
Skill Boost	58 points	Will provide +2 skill levels to your two most advanced skills or +4 skill levels to your most advanced skill.
Expertise Book	61 points	Reading this book will teach you the expertise needed to reach the 4 th rank of weapon mastery in one of the following styles: Bladesinging - Dawn Elves of Vinastra (Long blades) Shadow Skimming - Gloom Elves of Whisper Woods (Small blades) Granite Breaker – Mountain Dwarves of Firetip Mountains (Maces and Clubs) Sundered Heart – Leopard Beastkin of the Havandt tribe who dwell in the Plains of Gold (Spears)

Hole. Lee. Crap.

Richter couldn't believe what was hovering in his vision. These were the best offerings he had ever seen. The Schematic was 4th tier! That meant it might have three extra attributes than the base model of the weapon. The skill boost was amazing too! At worst, it would mean two more skill levels in Enchanting and Herb Lore. He had many bonuses helping him power level through his skill, but at level forty-nine, he'd be lucky to move 2% towards his next skill level after an entire week of work. Those two levels would let him save weeks, months, or years' worth of time and bring him that

much closer to finally becoming an *adept*.

It was the third option that stole his gaze though. It was an expertise book. While magic books taught him spells and while his skill book had made him an *apprentice* in Crafting in just a few hours, neither actually made him “good” at anything. When he was in battle, his high stats coupled with awesome gear let him overcome many of his enemies, but in a straight-up fight he might still have lost even to the lowliest soldier. He’d learned a great deal from more than five months of almost constant combat, but Richter never forgot that he had almost no formal training. The few times he’d gone up against trained fighters they’d either kicked his ass or he’d won because he’d prepared traps in advance.

This expertise book would actually give his body the capability to fight as if he’d been training for years! He didn’t understand the rank system for weapon mastery, but he knew that Yoshi trained every day to advance his fighting prowess. Though he had been training for months to learn the sword forms Yoshi had taught him, he still hadn’t even broken into the first rank of the sprite blade style. The other two options were tempting and the Schematic could help his entire army, but he couldn’t help himself. He’d never seen an expertise book and only knew about them because one had been mentioned in his Lore book.

Richter bought the book. Once more, a grey disc appeared in midair.

He retrieved his latest acquisition from the Sea of Chaos. His fingers were almost trembling with excitement! With a broad grin on his face, he examined the item.

<p>You have found:</p> <p>Expertise</p> <p>Book:</p> <p><i>Granite Breaker</i></p>	<p>Book Class: Rare</p> <p>Book Quality: Exquisitely Scribed</p> <p>Durability: 21/21</p> <p>Weight: 2.6 kg</p> <p>Traits: This book contains the secret fighting techniques of the <i>Granite Breaker</i> weapon expertise. Their battle style focuses on crushing blows with maces and clubs that can even sunder solid stone. A true <i>master</i> of this style can crush the strongest earth demons beneath his mighty blows.</p> <p>BE WARNED: Some might react negatively to seeing you use these techniques</p> <p>Requirement: To reach the first rank, <i>novice</i>, of this fighting style, you must possess:</p> <p><i>Strength:</i> 15 -MET-</p> <p><i>Mace Wielding Skill Level:</i> 10 -UNMET-</p>
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Richter could have screamed in frustration. He had just spent *all* his remaining Chaos Points on this damn book and he couldn't even use it yet? He hadn't planned to open it immediately, not after what had happened with the skill book. He couldn't afford to be trapped in some dream state for hours, not with the attack happening in mere hours. Now though, he couldn't help himself. Richter cracked the book, but couldn't read a single word. Flipping through the pages, it was all the same. He looked at the book sourly. Looked like his Luck wasn't up to the task this time. It went into his Bag of Holding.

He dismissed the final prompt with an annoyed wave of his hand.

Total Chaos Points: 1

Nothing he had bought would make the upcoming battle any easier, but every purchase did open interesting opportunities for the future. All of that got pushed to the back of his mind as he walked into the Forge of Heavens. He took in the scene.

Despite the fact that the sun was still hours from rising, more than a dozen smiths were working on his armor all at once. Two were putting the finishing touches on each of his boots. Another two worked on his greaves and one each was managing his gauntlets. The others were helping by feeding more wood into the furnace or standing by with tongs ready to take

hot metal from their colleagues.

Fires burned merrily in the hearths, and the ringing of hammers on anvils filled the air. Richter's attention was captured by the man standing at the central anvil. Krom was hammering on the skeeling scales, putting what looked like the final touches on his new armor. That was exciting, but what was fascinating was the glow surrounding the dwarf's hammer.

A green glow surrounded Krom's instrument and each blow rained sparks down on chestplate he was forging. Richter had never seen him use magic like this when smithing before. He had to assume it was another Talent the dwarf had bought.

Krom kept working for another five minutes before picking his head up and shouting, "Where the hells be our noble leader? If he dinna move his black arse here soon, this here armor will na be enchanted!"

"Uhhh, hello!" Richter said waving his hand.

"Ah, yer lordship! Ay dinna see ye there." The twinkling mischief in Krom's eyes put lie to the statement. "Ye still plan ta use Life enchantments for yer new armor?"

"I do indeed, buddy," Richter responded with a grin. "I do indeed."

"Well now, ay suppose it be time ta have her dun!" Krom replied, a broad grin creasing his salt-and-pepper beard.

For the next two hours, piece after piece of his new skeeling armor was enchanted. Richter sprinkled powdered crystal onto each and enchanted them. He also spent extra captured spirits to soulbond the items to him. The breastplate was the last piece and it was enchanted as successfully as the rest. Both Richter's skill and his expertise had advanced so that what had once been difficult now came easily. He did not let it go to his head however, and gave his complete attention to each task. When the chest piece was enspelled, Richter was going to lift it off of the anvil, but Krom stopped him, saying he had one last thing to add.

“For this here breastplate, milord, ay have something special in mind.”

Then he reached his fingers into a belt pouch and pulled out a shining yellow jewel. Richter could identify it as a sun sapphire, but not its clarity or the number of carats. Something that was starting to bug him. Only for a second though, because Krom dropped a bombshell!

“It took the very last of me Talent Points, but ay were able to buy two more Talents. The first be *Gem Forging*. Yer pal Sion got this yellow beauty from the vault after ay told him what ay had planned. Now, any dwarf worth his cock and ores be knowing the values of gems, but seeing as how yer not a dwarf, yer lordship, let me tell ye that a one carat sun sapphire be worth ten gold coins if she be *average* clarity. This here stone be *vibrant* though, and

that increases the value to thirteen gold crowns. That also goes up another 75% when ye factor in that the gem cut be *smooth pear*. Are ye following?”

“Not at all,” Richter chuckled. Krom had just said ‘smooth pear.’ Hearing that in the dwarf’s brogue and seeing him almost bouncing with excitement would be enough to make anyone smile.

“Har har,” Krom belted out. “Fair enough, yer lordship. Ye can talk to that new Jeweler to learn the ins and outs of gem cutting, but believe me when I tell yer that this here shiny bauble be three and half carats and so be worth at least eighty gold.”

Looking at the small rock, Richter was again astounded by just how expensive jewels could be. It was a bit pretty, but the sun sapphire was only about the size of his pinky nail. The fact that he could sell it for the equivalent of eight thousand bucks was just crazy. It also made the “frugal” part of him start paying attention. “Just, ah, just what are you going to be doing with that ‘bauble,’ Krom?”

“This!” With an insane grin, the dwarf put the gem on the anvil and swung his hammer down with all of his might.

“No!” Richter shouted. It was actually a scream, if he was being honest with himself, but he wasn’t thinking about such nuances as he flung a hand out to stop his insane Smith. The hammer smashed down with a

resounding clang... to the side of the yellow jewel.

“Har har har! Just fucking with ye, milord. Dinna feel bad. We dwarves know that losing gems be harder than losing an itch in a whorehouse!” That colorful commentary aside, Richter was staring at him like he was crazy. Krom winked back, “Ay be sure yew’ll forgive me when ye see what me new Talent can do!”

The dwarf’s face grew serious with concentration and he was stared intently at the gem. A moment later he spoke a word of Power. His hammer glowed green again and he pointed it at the jewel. A green glow of the same hue surrounded the gem and it floated into the air. Krom moved his hammer and the jewel followed the path of his tool until it hovered above the skeeling breastplate.

The gem slowly dropped down until it touched the center of his new chest armor. Richter was a bit embarrassed at having screamed in front of all the manly smiths, but he got over it when he saw the surface of the chest piece ripple. The material in the center flowed back, creating a divot that the sun sapphire nestled down in. The white material of the scales flowed back and over it, leaving it shining and embedded. A moment later the gem disappeared, covered by a layer of the whatever material made up the scales. All that remained to mark the location was a small bump.

Richter looked at Krom, who nodded in understanding to the unspoken question, “It still be there, yer lordship, but ay had it concealed. Some have left gems shining on the armor, but ay know, milord, sneaking and stealth be important. Ye can always reveal it yerself if ye choose though.” So saying, the dwarf touched the nodule and the yellow jewel was revealed. Taking his finger away, the scales of the armor flowed over it again.

When Krom spoke next, he did it with all seriousness, “Ay told ye about me Talent *Gem Forging*. It lets me bond a jewel and me forged armor and weapons as one. It also opened the other options for me sweet self. Ta do this next part ay still needed one more Talent, *Jeweled Essence*. Ay wouldna had done this for anyone else, yer lordship. Ay wouldna have bought these Talents for any other chief, but ay believe in ye. Ay am with ye for life.” There was no levity in Krom’s voice as he met Richter’s eyes. The chaos seed knew a thank you would make the dwarf uncomfortable so he just gave a manly nod in return. It was enough apparently. Krom nodded back and spoke again with excitement and merriment in his voice.

“Na I be sure yer wondering what was the point of all this, yer lordship. Ay dinna mind telling ye that *Gem Forging* offer all manner of options. Ay could increase the number of enchantment slots for ye ta work with, ay could increase the number of charges on yer enchanted weapons;

there be many options and each has its own Talent. As ay told ye though, ay chose to buy *Jeweled Essence* and that be why ay needed such a bright and shining gem.

“What ay have learned, yer lordship, be that every gem have a true power deep within them. Adding them to yer weapons and armor give a taste of that power! Now look and see what old Krom be givin ye!”

The dwarf’s hammer blazed with green power again and a beam of light shot from the tool into the breastplate. Right after, a prompt appeared in Richter’s vision.

*Know This! Each carat of **Sun Sapphire** used by a Smith with the **Jeweled Essence** Talent increases Life magic spell strength by +0.5% and increases the power of Life enchantments on the bejeweled item by +1%. The **vibrant** clarity of the stone increases this bonus by +200%.*

The edge of each of the off-white scales developed a slight yellow tinge, and the enchantments increased in power.

“Now!” Krom exclaimed with pride, “Look at yer new armor in all its glory!”

Richter did and finally saw the true power of his skeeling armor!

Every single piece had been dual enchanted. He had initially debated over exactly which enchantments to use as he now had so many to choose

from. *Earth Resistance, Fire Resistance, Increased Attack Speed*, the list went on. He had waffled back and forth until he realized something. He didn't really have to choose. Even though he'd only ever had two suits of armor since coming to The Land, there was no reason he couldn't have five or ten or fifty! He was a lord and an Enchanter. What was the point in having so many resources if he couldn't make different sets of gear to fit different needs. That was why Richter had decided to make the skeeling scales into his zombie-undead-ass-kickin'-armor!

You have found:	Defense: +19
Skeeling Life	Durability: 123/123
Helmet	Item Class: Unusual
	Armor Type: Head, Light
	Quality: Superb
	Weight: 1.7 kg
	Traits:
	+8 Life Defense*
	+3-4 Damage/5 seconds to Death creatures
	+2% Earth Resistance

	*+100% vs Death
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Bejeweled</p> <p>Skeeling Life</p> <p>Chest Piece</p>	<p>Defense: +24</p> <p>Durability: 135/135</p> <p>Item Class: Scarce</p> <p>Armor Type: Chest, Light</p> <p>Quality: Exquisite</p> <p>Weight: 3.3 kg</p> <p>Traits:</p> <p>+10 Life Defense*</p> <p>+4-5 Damage/5 seconds to Death creatures</p> <p>Contains the Jewel: Sun Sapphire</p> <p>+2% Dark Resistance</p> <p>*+100% vs Death</p>
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Skeeling Life</p> <p>Braces</p>	<p>Defense: +15</p> <p>Durability: 126/126</p> <p>Item Class: Unusual</p> <p>Armor Type: Arms, Light</p> <p>Quality: Superb</p>

	Weight: 1.5 kg Traits: +8 Life Defense* +3-4 Damage/5 seconds to Death creatures +2% Earth Resistance *+100% vs Death
You have found: Skeeling Life Gauntlets	Defense: +15 Durability: 125/139 Item Class: Unusual Armor Type: Hands, Light Quality: Superb Weight: 1.4 kg Traits: +8 Life Defense* +3-4 Damage/5 seconds to Death creatures +2% Fire Resistance *+100% vs Death
You have found: Skeeling Life	Defense: +16

<p>Greaves</p>	<p>Durability: 122/122</p> <p>Item Class: Unusual</p> <p>Armor Type: Legs, Light</p> <p>Quality: Superb</p> <p>Weight: 1.3 kg</p> <p>Traits:</p> <p>+8 Life Defense*</p> <p>+3-4 Damage/5 seconds to Death creatures</p> <p>+2% Air Resistance</p> <p>*+100% vs Death</p>
<p>You have found:</p> <p>Skeeling Life</p> <p>Boots</p>	<p>Defense: +17</p> <p>Durability: 124/124</p> <p>Item Class: Unusual</p> <p>Armor Type: Feet, Light</p> <p>Quality: Superb</p> <p>Weight: 1.5 kg</p> <p>Traits:</p> <p>+8 Life Defense*</p> <p>+3-4 Damage/5 seconds to Death creatures</p>

	+2% Water Resistance *+100% vs Death
You have found a Complete Armor Set: Skeeling Life Armor <i>(Fitted to Richter of the Mist Village)</i> Class: Unusual	Matched Armor Set Bonus: Defense given by each piece increased by 25% Fitted Bonus: +10% Defense when worn by Richter of the Mist Village. -10% Defense when worn by anyone else. Material Bonus: +15% Defense vs Slashing and Piercing attacks <i>Shell - ???</i> Gem Bonus (Sun Sapphire): <i>Life Magic Strength: +5%</i> <i>Life Enchantment Strength: +11%</i> Life Aura Bonus: The cumulative Life Aura enchantments will discomfort up to <i>common</i> -souled Death creatures and turn away <i>basic</i> Death creatures

The armor was amazing! Not only did it offer twice as much defense

as his enhanced sprite armor, but the entire thing was *unusual* class or better. Looking at all the stats, he could well imagine why. With the 10% defense “Fitted Bonus” and the 25% “Armor Set Bonus” and the Life enchantments, his new chestplate had almost four times as much defensive power as his old defense. That didn’t even account for the fact that the enchantment would be twice times as effective against Death creatures.

The skeeling armor also increased defense against slashing and piercing attacks dramatically. He remembered the monster the scales had come from, shrugging off any blows that didn’t land head on. Richter chuckled to himself, remembering that heart-thudding battle. He could probably kill a giant skeeling single-handedly these days, but back then? He’d nearly strangled Sion for drawing the armadillo-looking monster out of its hole.

After they had slain it though, they’d found a Seed Core, the same item that had grown into the Quickening. Having the Core in its nest is what had let the skeeling grow to such a large size and had made its scales as strong as quicksilver. Now, about a hundred and thirty days later, he was going to be wearing its hardened skin. Between the armor and the celestial tree, he supposed Sion’s choice to rile the monster had turned out all right. That didn’t mean his friend wasn’t still a total asshole... because he was. That was why they were best friends!

The gem was awesome as well! It had increased the power of his Life magic by 5% and, even better, it had increased the Strength of his armor's Life enchantments by 11%. It almost gave another point Life defense to each piece. If he fought an undead in melee, including his Light Armor skill, his chest plate would give him +70 defense. Suddenly, he felt a lot better about the upcoming battle.

The enchantment boost also gave another point of Life damage to the *Life Aura* enchantments, increasing the harm his armor did to Death creatures. With the various enchantments on all six pieces of armor, Richter was basically radioactive to the undead! Any Death monster within five feet of him might be turned away and any zombies actually touching him would lose five points of health every second.

He looked at Krom at a loss for words. With a rush of emotions, he stepped next to the dwarf and embraced him. The Smith was taken completely off guard and just stood there, arms out to the side. It got more uncomfortable as the seconds drew on. The fact that Richter was also over six feet tall and Krom was just over four and a half added to the weirdness. The snickering of the other dwarves was what broke the Smith.

Stepping back and shaking Richter off, he gruffly said, "Ahhh, ay be glad ye like me work yer lordship. Ay just be doing me Job as village Smith."

“No,” Richter said shaking his head. “You have gone above and beyond. When we first met, you were a cocky asshole.” Silence reigned in the forge for a second before Richter added with a smile, “But now you’re *my* cocky asshole.” There were a few more snickers from the dwarves. When Richter realized how that sounded, he harrumphed in irritation. He was trying to make a moment here!

“The point is, Krom,” he continued, “months ago you swore to serve by my side in war and to make this village your own. You have done that and more. You are not just the village Smith. You are my friend. If there is anything that I can do for you, then ask. If it is within my power, then you will have it.”

*You have offered a **Favor** to your village Smith, Krom.*

Know This! As leader of a Settlement, your words are not idle. Though a Favor does not have the same strength and consequences as a Vow, they are still not to be given lightly!

Richter hadn’t been expecting the prompts, but he did not shy from them. He had meant every word. Silence reigned in the forge once again. A lord offering his friendship was no small thing, but an open Favor was something else entirely. The dwarves and few human smiths waited for the Smith’s response.

Krom looked back at Richter, no longer immune to the emotions of the moment. When he spoke, his voice was rough, “Yer lordship... ay be honored to serve this village. When ay first came here, ay admit, ay was more balls than brains. Ay thought ay could force ye ta do as ay wanted. Ay was wrong, and serving a great man like yerself be the deepest honor ay could imagine. Ay be moved beyond words,” he bowed his head and placed a fist over his heart before adding, “Lord Mist.”

A chorus of “Lord Mist” “Lord Mist” echoed out from the other smiths.

Krom raised his head and then a broad grin split his face. “If ye be serious about that Favor though, there do be something ye could do.” He leaned in and whispered something to Richter.

The chaos seed pulled back and looked at the dwarf with a funny expression on his face, “Really? You really want me to do that?”

“Oh ay,” Krom said, dragging the second word out with a crazy gleam in his eyes.

Richter shrugged, “Okay. I don’t know if this is going to work out like you want, but good luck.” He looked over at Futen, “Relay this message to Sumiko after the battle with the lich. I need her to personally take over Krom’s education in Life magic.” The dwarf cleared his throat and looked at

his liege meaningfully. Richter sighed, but added, “He is to get at least two hours of individual instruction each week.” The Smith let out a telling cough, and Richter closed his eyes before shaking his head and adding the last bit of Krom’s requested Favor, “It would be fine if it happened over dinner.”

“Ha! That be worth every Talent Point!” Krom exclaimed. He looked over at the other sprite, “Ay like that sprite. Ye can always tell a good woman. Ay guarantee she can bring a man back to life in more ways than one!” His ribald laughing echoed through the forge.

Richter wasn’t nearly as amused. Somehow, he was pretty sure there would be consequences for having just pimped out his village Healer.

Krom had none of the same reservations, and more than one high five was given in the Forge of Heavens that night. When he was done with his opening celebration, he looked to Richter and asked, “Be there anything ay can do for ye, yer lordship?”

Richter thought about Krom’s little joke with the sun sapphire, and plastered an innocent smile onto his face, “Now that you mention it, there is one more thing I’d been meaning to discuss with you.”

To move the **Forge of Heavens**, visualize the new location. The amount of Settlement Points required will be based upon the new location.

Richter's smile leveled up to *I got you good, you fucker!*

CHAPTER 96 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



Richter made his choice and mist began to rise directly through the floor of the forge and all around it. With a series of startled oaths, all the smiths ran out of the Core building. Their liege jogged after them, a mischievous smile on his face. The opaque grey tendrils continued to spread until the entire building was hidden in a dome of mist.

A moment later, the dome collapsed in on itself, dissipating as it fell. All that was left in its place was a rectangle of bare earth exactly the dimensions of the Forge of Heaven. Worms and other insects scabbled in panic to dig themselves into the safety of the ground.

“By the hairless balls of Odir! Where be me godsdamn forge?!”
Krom bellowed in panic.

Richter couldn’t help himself. He fell over laughing. After everything he’d been through over the last few days, it felt amazing. Krom had to physically restrain himself from attacking his beloved lord, but his

fingers still tightened dangerously around the hammer in his grasp. Another impressive stream of profanity issued from the dwarf's mouth as he asked again where his smithy was. Richter took pity on him and told him to look in the upper meadow. Every single dwarf took off at a sprint and the chaos seed looked on impressed. Dwarves could really move those short legs when they were motivated!

He jogged after them, nodding to the confused guards stationed at the gated entrance to the northern meadow. Richter was sure Krom had passed through the gates like a hurricane, violent and unstoppable. When he jogged up to the top of the hill, he saw that the forge was exactly where he had wanted it to go. The two Core buildings now lay next to one another safely out of view of any strangers that might one day come to the village. Every major structure, barring the Dungeon, was now safely behind another layer of walls. The dwarves had made their way into the Forge of Heavens searching to ensure that everything was where it was supposed to be. From what Richter could see, it had been moved without setting one thing out of place. An entirely new round of cursing went up when the pixie children woke up and decided the forge was their new playground that was conveniently right outside of their house.

Half an hour and some stern words from Elora later, all the pixie children were forbidden from entering the forge without permission. From

the stubborn looks on some of their faces, Richter was pretty sure the village had only seen round one of the pixie-dwarf battle royale. It took a little bit longer to have Krom forgive him, but soon the dwarf helped Richter don his new armor.

They spent the next thirty minutes doing final tightenings and loosenings on his armor. The smiths were a bit too aggressive in cinching the straps in Richter's opinion, but he took it in stride. As they did, he asked a few questions, like what would happen if someone pried the jewel out of the chestplate. Krom assured him that his *Gem Forging* Talent made that impossible. The durability of the breastplate would have to drop to zero and be destroyed before the gem could be removed. The dwarf wasn't sure if the gem would also be destroyed if that happened.

The next question Richter had was why they couldn't add more jewels to the armor. Even though he didn't like how much it cost, this seemed like an awesome usage of his wealth. Krom told him that there were limits to his *Gem Forging* Talent. Until he bought the next rank of the Talent, he could only use one gem on each suit of armor or weapon.

When the final adjustments were completed, Richter cast *Mirror* and saw himself in his new armor for the first time. Krom had arrayed the scales in an overlapping cascade, the higher ones covering the top section of the lower. They were tightly bound together, however, so even slipping a blade

under one wouldn't allow his skin to be pierced. The individual scales were supple even though they could stop an arrow strike. When Richter bent, he could feel them conform to his body. His arms were completely covered and the gauntlets both had a sharpened scale sticking out past the knuckles. The dwarf explained that in close quarter combat, they should be the equivalent of a quicksilver punch knife. They would make shallow but dangerously powerful strikes.

The greaves and boots were made of the same, and all of it was lined with soft leather so that it wasn't overly harsh against Richter's skin. He was still wearing simple pants and a sleeveless shirt under the armor, but without extra padding, you were just asking for open sores when the armor rubbed you the wrong way.

As powerful as the armor was though, Richter knew immediately that it wouldn't be ideal for every situation. The off-white color would make hiding in the forest much harder. With his Cloak of Concealment and Stealth skill it would be possible, but neither were an invisibility spell. Hiding yourself in The Land wasn't too different than hiding yourself on Earth. Concealing himself among green trees wearing this white armor would be much harder than while wearing sprite armor with its soft earth tones. He supposed it might be better for hiding in winter though... or if he ever made it to Hoth. As advanced as his Enchanting skill was, he also just couldn't

match the stat boosts the enhanced sprite armor had provided. The main point was that there were other factors to consider than just defense.

Richter was already missing the extra eight points of Strength and seven points of Dexterity that his old armor had provided. There was a noticeable difference in how easy it was to swing his weapons and move around. He might also come to miss the forty-four points of mana his old helmet provided. The sprite armor had given +20% Earth resistance as its special perk as well, which hadn't come up too often yet but had still been nice to have. He absolutely couldn't complain about his new armor though. He was one lean, mean, undead-killing machine! The Forge of Heavens had even made itself known by giving every piece of armor a random 2% resistance to a Basic Element. There were pluses and minuses, but at the end of the day, his new armor was seriously clutch!

With a grin on his face he asked Krom a final question about the armor, "One thing I don't understand is-"

"Ay," the dwarf said interrupting him, "the 'Shell' material bonus." It was the trait that had appeared as only question marks on the interface. "Ay dinna know, yer lordship. This be the first time anyone be making armor out of this type of creature. If yer lordship was right about it only growing big because it were near a Seed Core, then yer armor just might be unique. Ay dinna know what 'shell' means, but ay suppose ye will learn in time."

Richter shrugged. If the creator of the armor didn't know, then there was nothing to be done. He thanked the dwarf again and was starting to leave when Alma jumped onto the central anvil and hissed at the Smith.

“Har har,” Krom laughed. “Ay were just playing with ye, lil beastie! Ay would na forget yer special gift.”

Richter looked askance at him, but before the dwarf could speak again, the first ray of sunlight sneaked over the trees and struck the Forge of Heavens. In that same moment, the penumbra of Vidaal, the Life moon, fell upon the forge as well. A beam of white and gold light shot from the boundary of the Core building and struck the sun sapphire embedded in Richter's armor. The thin scale coloring fell away and the yellow jewel flared with power! Richter's muscles locked into place for one long moment of warmth and light. Then it passed and both Krom's and his own vision were filled with prompts.

*Know This! Now that you have researched the tech **Predict Auspicious Times I** you may also know the circumstances of random cosmic alignments that trigger. To trigger this particular **Occurrence**, forge an item using a Sun Sapphire, a gem that is equal parts Life and Light, and let the first light of day fall upon the Forge of Heavens while Vidal, the Life Moon, is at its perihelion.*

*The special ability of the Forge of Heavens has triggered! The truest nature of Light and Life is to strive for excellence and perfection. As such, the quality of the armor bonded to the sun sapphire has increased by +1. It is now a **Masterwork**!*

Richter felt the chestplate he was wearing shift in small but detectable ways. It became a bit more comfortable, resting easier on his shoulders and seeming a touch lighter than before. He didn't have time to check its new stats though, because one of the pillars that lined the Forge of Heavens began to glow. Richter and all the smiths walked over as, before their eyes, the smooth stone began to be inscribed though no one was touching it. The lines moved quickly over the pillar etching a shape. Seconds later, they could all see it was a carving of the breastplate Richter was wearing, including the gem embedded in the middle.

More prompts appeared.

*Know This! The Forge of Heavens has just taken its first step towards becoming a **Level 2 Core Building**. A **Masterwork** item has been created! Continue to produce works of such fine dedication and skill to progress your Core building to its next iteration.*

You have received a Joint Settlement Quest: **Heavenly Forge I**

You now know that *Masterwork* arms and armor must be created in order

to upgrade the Forge of Heavens to Level 2. Continue to provide your smiths with what they require to craft such wonderful items.

This is a Joint Quest involving the Master of the Forge of Heavens and the smiths who work within it. Finishing this quest will benefit everyone who creates a *Masterwork* as well as yourself.

Success Conditions: Create 100 *Masterwork* items in the Forge of Heavens. Current Count: 1/100.

Reward: Unknown

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: This Quest cannot be refused.

Richter and Krom both looked at each other and smiled. The other smiths cheered.

“Ay guess ay have got me work cut out fer me then,” Krom said with an excited gleam in his eyes. Then his expression became thoughtful, “Ay knew sun sapphires were associated with Life, but ay only guessed that they would be part of Light. The ‘sun’ and all, ye understand. Do ye think there are more gems that are equal parts Light and some other Power? If ye found that out, ay might be able to predict when the other moons were in the right place for this kind of bonus. What do ye think, yer lordship?”

No sooner had the dwarf finished speaking than another quest prompt appeared in Richter's vision.

You have received a Settlement Quest: **Gems of Power**

You have learned that certain gems embody the Powers of The Land. Sun sapphires embody the powers of Light and Life. If you found more of these dichotomous jewels, you might be able to trigger more bonuses from the Forge of Heavens. You have already discovered 1 of 7 gems which embody Light and another Basic Element, which leaves six more to be found.

Success Conditions: Discover the seven jewels whose nature is linked half to Light and half to another Basic Element.

Reward: Unknown, but graded to increase with each stone found

Penalty for Failure or Refusal: None

Do you accept? *Yes or No?*

Richter accepted it easily, as he'd already had the same thought. He wasn't sure what a "perihelion" was, but there was no doubt in his mind that either the Scholars or Randy would be able to clue him in. Futen was floating close by as usual and took the note to pass quest information on to

the three men.

Richter and the other smiths spent a few minutes clapping Krom on the back and praising him for making his first *masterwork* armor, even if he had gotten a little help. The mountain dwarf told Richter that doing so had actually earned him no less than three Profession Quests. Each quest should earn him more Talent Points when he finished them. That went on until Alma had apparently gotten her fill of men ignoring her and shot a bolt of lightning in consternation. The jagged electricity hit the central anvil that Richter, Krom and a few other dwarves happened to be touching. They all jumped back with curses and oaths.

Richter started to scold her, but Krom stopped him with a chuckle, “Naw, yer lordship. The little beastie be right. Ay did promise to show her the new toys, and it be my fault for forgetting. Besides, it no be wise to make a woman feel neglected.” Alma looked at Richter pointedly after Krom said that. “Ay learned that lesson from me ninth girlfriend, Helge. At least yer dragon used a wee bit of magic on me hand. Helge took a hammer to me head!”

Krom chortled over the errors of his youth and walked over to the heavy elementum chest. Opening the seamless block with a thought, he withdrew three items. Richter examined them, and his mouth dropped open in shock. The armor Krom had made for him had been wonderful. The

sunstone gem had been an unexpected and wonderful gift. In Richter's opinion, his boosted Luck was working overtime. What he was looking at now though, brought a literal tear to his eye. It was a set of Psi Dragonling armor!

"Krom," Richter began, at a loss for words. "How?"

The dwarf was smiling broadly at Alma. He had set the shining items down on the anvil and the dragonling was walking around them in inspection. "There be one more Talent that ay dinna tell ye about, yer lordship. We have all come to love yer little beastie and I couldna keep thinking about how her wee body was na protected. So as soon as ay came back, ay bought a Talent called *Barding*. If ay can lay my hands on a creature, then ay can see what armor or weapons they might be able ta use."

Richter hadn't taken his eyes away from the shining silver items, but he had still been paying attention, "So you were able to come up with Schematics for this?"

"Ah, no," Krom responded shaking his head. "Schematics would work for any and everybody that would try to make this here armor. Me Talent guides me ta do just what is needed to fit the creature ay touched. Even if ay tried to explain it and write it down, it wouldna work for anyone else." He smiled again, "But, thanks to the big boost in Productivity ye got

the whole village and, ay imagine, a bit of the Luck floating around, ay was able to almost finish these afore the sun set yesterday. Ay left the last bit til now so that ye could enchant them when ay were done.”

Krom’s smile slipped when he said the next part, “Ay must be honest with ye, milord. Ay know ye charged me with making truesilver weapons, but the true potential of the metal still be beyond me. It be an *adept* rank metal, so everything ay make will be one quality level less than if me smithing rank were higher than *journeyman*. That be why the claws only be *well crafted* and the armor be *exceptional*. Ay did me best, but the penalty showed itself.”

“You’ve done amazing, man,” Richter told him, laying a hand on his shoulder. The dwarf looked at him gratefully. “I wouldn’t have anyone else making my gear, and one day you will be a *master* smith.”

Krom took a deep breath, visibly swelling with pride over his lord’s praise, “Ay need a few minutes before ay can finish her armor. Ten minutes or so. Ye have time ta decide what ye want to enspell yer beastie’s new armor with.”

True to his word, Krom finished all the armor in short order. There was a moment when Alma spoke aloud and then locked eyes with the smith. Krom shook his head and tried to object, but ultimately conceded. After that,

Krom retrieved a vial of dark black powder and worked it into each piece. The metal lost its shine and became a dull silver that would not reflect light. Richter understood without even needing to be told. As powerful as the truesilver items were, if they stayed gleaming Alma would be a target on the battlefield. With them darkened she would still be able to hide, though the armor would probably still negate the chameleon enhancement he had purchased for her.

As each item was finished, Richter spent captured souls with abandon. It used the very last of his *luminous* souls and he had to spend several more *common* souls besides. Nothing was too good for his familiar. What made it even better was that a beam shot out from the central anvil when Krom finished the chain mail, bathing the armor in white light.

*The **Forge of Heavens** has automatically upgraded the quality of the Truesilver Mail Armor of the Psi Dragonling from **Superb** to **Exquisite**.*

That boost to quality not only let him place stronger enchantments on the armor, but also increased its defense at the same time. There was normally a 10% chance for any forged item to jump up a level in quality, and Richter was more than happy that his luck had helped keep his familiar safe.

“Ye truly are a lucky bastard, yer lordship!” Krom said with a laugh.

“I think we both are,” Richter told him, equally excited.

“Ye must have been talking to one of me ex-wives! Har har.” Krom turned to look at Alma, “Now come here, ye beautiful beastie. Let me get on yer new clothes.”

Krom picked up the first item: a sheet of chainmail as light as a feather but powerful, and the bane of evil creatures. The links were so tiny Richter could barely make them out. Even with magic, it didn’t seem possible that the Smith could have made it. Krom helped Alma place a leg through each of the four prepared holes and then clasped the open end together. The fit was so perfect that it was snug like a second skin. Her dusky black body now looked to be made of dark silver.

Next, he picked up the claws, which looked like a pile of spikes, none longer than an inch. Krom’s Talent had even guided the smith to leave a hollow channel along the length of each claw so Alma could still make use of her psi poison. It took no time at all for him to slip them onto her feet. Last, he picked up the mail coif. It fit over her head and down the length of her neck. There, it attached to the chainmail covering her body and merged into a seamless piece.

Krom explained that the first rank of his Talent, *Barding*, “... only let me make what be considered light armor by whatever creature be wearing it. Every metal, even quicksilver, was too heavy, and ay thought ay might have to use leather for ye wee lass.” He looked at Richter with a broad grin, “Then

ye gave me those wonderful truesilver rinds from the Quickening. Even though ay dinna have the skill yet to work it perfect, ay be sure ye will agree, it be well worth the two ingots ay used.”

When Alma was wearing her new raiment, he examined the final stats of her new armor.

<p>You have found:</p> <p>Truesilver Mail</p> <p>Armor of Slick</p> <p>Life</p>	<p>Defense: +20*</p> <p>Durability: 302/302</p> <p>Item Class: Rare</p> <p>Armor Type: Body, Light</p> <p>Quality: Exquisite</p> <p>Weight: 0.3 kg</p> <p>Traits:</p> <p>+2% Death Resistance</p> <p>+10 Life Defense**</p> <p>+3-4% difficulty for enemies to hold the wearer</p> <p>Requirements: Can only be worn by a Psi Dragonling</p> <p><small>*+400% vs Abyssal, +200% vs Demonic and Hellish, +100% vs Evil (not cumulative)</small></p> <p><small>**+100% vs Death</small></p>

<p>You have found:</p> <p>Truesilver Attack</p> <p>Claws of</p> <p>Shattered Ice x 4</p>	<p>Attack: 18-19*</p> <p>Durability: 297/297</p> <p>Item Class: Rare</p> <p>Armor Type: Claws, Light</p> <p>Quality: Well Crafted</p> <p>Weight: 0.03 kg</p> <p>Traits:</p> <p>+10% Damage to Spell Barriers</p> <p>+6-7 Earth Damage**</p> <p>5% chance to <i>Disarm</i></p> <p>3% chance to <i>Shatter</i></p> <p>+3-4 Water Damage***</p> <p>3% Chance to <i>Freeze</i></p> <p>Requirements: Can only be worn by a Psi Dragonling</p> <p>Charges: 810/810</p> <p>*+400% vs Abyssal, +200% vs Demonic and Hellish, +100% vs Evil (not cumulative)</p> <p>**+200% vs Air, +300% vs Crystalline</p> <p>***+100% vs Fire</p>
<p>You have found:</p>	<p>Defense: +16*</p>

Truesilver Mail	Durability: 314/314
Coif of Slick Life	Item Class: Rare
	Armor Type: Head, Light
	Quality: Exceptional
	Weight: 0.1 kg
	Traits:
	+2% Life Resistance
	+8 Life Defense**
	+2% difficulty for enemies to hold the wearer
	Requirements: Can only be worn by a Psi
	Dragonling
	<small>*+400% vs Abyssal, +200% vs Demonic and Hellish, +100% vs Evil (not cumulative)</small>
	<small>**+100% vs Death</small>

He had decided to focus on defense. The *Life Armor* enchantment would protect Alma from any attack and would be twice as effective against Death attacks. For the claws, he had added his highest ranked attack enchantments, *Freeze* and *Sonic Damage*. Alma had always been able to hold her own in a fight, but Richter had never stopped worrying about her low health and fragile body. At last, she had a defense that would match her

offensive capabilities. The stress on his heart eased just a bit.

Krom told him that he was sorry that he hadn't been able to come up with anything to protect her wings or her tail. The Smith explained that the first rank of the *Barding* Talent only offered a few choices, but that further ranks would show him how to make additional weapons and armor for Alma and other creatures. He also revealed that there were more Talents branching off from *Barding* that would let him make her medium and even heavy armor. One day she might wear an entire suit of platemail. If she could meet the requirements of such items, of course.

Richter told him again how wonderfully he'd done, then asked another question, "Can you add one of these onto her armor with your *Gem Forging* Talent?" He opened the brown pouch holding the psi crystals from the chupacabras. Alma had been strutting around on top of the elementum anvil, entirely impressed with herself in her new armor and expecting everyone else to be so as well. As soon as the psychic light fell upon her though, she forgot all about her truesilver items and leaped into Richter's arms so she could be closer to the blue-white gems. The dragonling crooned softly as she watched their inner radiance slowly spin.

Krom examined the psi crystal, but unfortunately it wouldn't register with his Talent. Maybe because it was a crystal, maybe because it wasn't naturally occurring in The Land. the dwarf didn't know, but he said he could

add another jewel. The problem was, he didn't know which jewel did what until it was added to a piece of armor and that was an *expensive* game of trial and error. Luckily, they had a whole village worth of people to call on.

Randolphus didn't know anything about it and the Jeweler, Daven, had never helped in magical smithing before. It was Hisako that came to the rescue. Richter had left the forge and found her in the catacombs, putting the finishing touches on the attack plan. She looked a bit annoyed at being distracted to talk about gems, but was able to help. In her library back at the Hearth Tree, she had a book that detailed the magical properties of gems. She hadn't read it in quite some time, but she was able to jot down a few qualities that she remembered. She also told him that gems had multiple levels of attributes, but she only remembered a few of the first level properties.

Gem	Property
Diamond	Increases Perception
Aquamarine	Increases Water spell power and resistance
Amethyst	Increase Death spell power and resistance
Topaz	Increase Movement Speed
Amazonine	Decreases Stamina Consumption

Onyx	Increases Concealment
Ruby	Increases Fire spell power and resistance

Richter just had to copy her library. It was definitely going to be a priority after the battle. Forging with gems was more powerful than he had thought at first if it could increase secondary attributes like Concealment and Perception. What if he could find one that would increase his Creativity or his Intuition? For Alma though, there was only one choice. Richter already knew he had a large stone in the Treasury so he retrieved it and then ran back to the forge.

Only moments later, a large black gem was floating through the air and melding itself to Alma's armor. This time, it didn't just embed itself in the small links of her armor. Instead the onyx seemed to drain into the links of armor and each piece turned jet black. Richter asked if Krom had meant to do that, but the Smith was surprised as well. All he could guess was that the color change had something to do with the fact that all of Alma's gear had been made out of truesilver.

Richter had chosen a large five-carat gem that was triangle cut and *brilliant* in clarity. It had been appraised by Hafiz in Law at seven gold crowns, three silver marks and five copper shills. The fact that it didn't cost

as much as the sun sapphire didn't factor into Richter's decision making at all, of course. Not at all. The important point was the prompt that appeared when it was added.

*Know This! Each carat of **Onyx** used by a Smith with the Jeweled Essence Talent increases Concealment by +0.5. The brilliant clarity of the stone increases this bonus by 400%.*

Alma jumped into the air, exultant over her new gear. Richter looked up to check the stats of her body armor again, or at least he tried to. He had to search for several seconds until he saw her. His own Perception was +15, but it seemed her new armor had added to her base Concealment enough that her value was higher or at least very near his own. When he finally did see her, he realized his eyes had just slid over her hiding place several times before locking on.

You were hiding, huh? he asked with a chuckle.

She trilled her mighty prowess and hopped back into his arms. Krom took a half step back, as the dwarf hadn't been able to see her until she jumped back into the light.

"Ay guess the gem works, eh yer lordship?"

Richter couldn't disagree. Checking her armor stats, he saw that the gem had increased her Concealment by +13. Coupled with the enchantments

and strong defense the truesilver armor gave, the dragonling wasn't just ready for battle. She was ready for war!

The chaos seed left the forge, needing to check on a few other things before the battle. First, he sent Futen to find Roswan. He sent a message that he'd meet the elf in thirty minutes by the Well of Offering. Then he walked "across the street" to the Dragon's Cauldron. Having the Core buildings next door to each other was already making his life easier, though he was fairly certain the short-legged dwarves would be complaining before long about having to walk up and down the hill each day. Inside his alchemy Core building he found Tabia hard at work. She laid down the vial she'd been holding when she noticed her lord.

"You are to thank for the new noisy neighbors, my lord?"

"Thought you might be lonely," Richter told her with a smile.

"Very thoughtful. Random clanging and banging is exactly what I need when performing exacting chemical reactions."

Oh, Richter thought, he hadn't really considered that. "What have you got for me?" he asked brightly.

She glared at him for a bit longer, but Tabia was an old soldier and it wasn't the first time her superior officer had pulled a bonehead move before. "I wasn't able to make as many potions as you wanted, my lord, and you took

a large amount of the health potions for the Dungeon battle,” she began.

“I know,” Richter responded nodding. “Just give me what you have. I know you’ve done your best.”

“As you say, my lord,” then she began to open glass cubbies and hand him the vials inside.

You have found: Health Potion x 28	Alchemy Class: Uncommon Alchemy Level: Solution Alchemy Strength: Processed Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Will restore 447 Health Points over 15 seconds
---	--

You have found: Mana Potion x 50	Alchemy Class: Uncommon Alchemy Level: Solution Alchemy Strength: Processed Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Will restore 312 Mana Points over 16 seconds
---	--

You have found: Stamina Potion x 50	Alchemy Class: Uncommon Alchemy Level: Solution Alchemy Strength: Processed Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg
--	---

Traits: Will restore 453 Health Points over 16 seconds.

Richter sighed when he saw the amount of health potions. They really had burned through the red vials during the fight with the mauler and chupacabras. Tabia told him that she'd tried to make more, but even with the 10% success bonus given by the Dragon's Cauldron, there was still a 15% chance that any *solution* level potion she tried to brew would fail.

When it took an excess of three to four days of diligent attention to make even one batch, he was happy she'd been able to give him this much. The only reason she had been able to make this many potions was because of another one of the cauldron's properties that would copy a successfully made potion ten times with a 100% reliability as long as enough ingredients were supplied.

Though there weren't as many health potions as Richter had hoped, Tabia had been able to add other potions to the war effort. The first was more Sun Lotus Poison and the second was a highly flammable oil that was especially deadly to the undead.

You have
found:
**Sun Lotus
Poison** x 50

Alchemy Class: Uncommon
Alchemy Level: Infusion
Alchemy Strength: Fortified
Durability: 5/5
Weight: 0.1 kg

	Traits: This poison has no effect on living creatures, but can be devastating to Death creatures. Causes 48-69 damage/second of Life damage for 16 seconds
--	---

You have found: Flammable Life Oil x 50	Alchemy Class: Unusual Alchemy Level: Tincture Alchemy Strength: Fortified Durability: 5/5 Weight: 0.1 kg Traits: Creatures caught in these flames will lose up 85 HP/sec . Flames will last up to 1 minute and 57 seconds . +236% damage vs Death
---	--

“I remembered when you told me about the Life oil you used against the crypt mistress while claiming your second Power, my lord.” Richter nodded. It had been the only way he’d been able to kill the crypt mistress. “I have been trying to reproduce it and finally found a recipe that worked, though it is only a *tincture* and the flames will not last long. There was one positive side effect of my experimentation, however. The oil I devised is extremely flammable.” Tabia always liked things better when they exploded or were flammable. “If you break several of these in a row on the ground, it should make a wall of flames.” Hearing that, Richter had to agree that it was cool when things were flammable.

“I also have one more potion that should prove useful,” she added hesitantly. Richter was immediately on his guard. Tabia didn’t hesitate about anything, including making explosives like red foxfire. She walked over to a cabinet and pulled out a... contraption. It looked like two potion vials joined at the tops by a “T” shaped piece of metal. A small pin was sticking out of the third leg, that had a small perpendicular bar at the end for easy turning. In one vial was a metallic silver solution that glowed white and in the other solution was an angry red fluid that glowed orange. She pulled a second device out of a second cabinet, handing him the first and laying the other on a nearby table.

“This,” Tabia began, pointing at the silver side, “is a distillate of truesilver I obtained by dripping acid onto one of the Quickening rinds. This,” she continued pointing at the red side, “is an extract of abyssal essence that I was able to gain from the heart of the gobrit tree First Meidon Sion brought back to the village.”

“And this?” Richter asked pointing to the pin.

“The piece of metal connecting the two vials has a cork core. At the center of the cork is a small ampule of acid. If you turn the pin, the ampule will break, and the acid will eat through the cork. Once it is gone, then both solutions will be able to mix.”

“And what happens then?”

Instead of answering, she let him to the back of the Dragon’s Cauldron. While they walked, she asked him, “Do you remember how I used the glass cubbies to contain explosions when I was learning to make red foxfire?” Richter nodded. She’d only started that policy after she’d blown her own eyebrows off. It had turned out to be a very effective policy though, because the magically reinforced cupboards were able to contain any accidental blasts without even taking a scratch. That was because Core buildings were almost impossibly strong. The Dragon’s Cauldron was not only a Core edifice, but it was also made of the impossibly strong metal called glass, one of the hardest substances in The Land. In scientific terms, that made the cauldron “strong as balls.” Not only had the cubbies been able to contain the red foxfire explosions, but Core buildings were self-healing and so any damage caused had been repaired in short order.

That was why Richter’s mouth dropped open when he saw an entire *series* of cubbies had been demolished and several more surrounding ones were cracked.

“That,” Tabia told Richter in an instructional voice, “is what happens when two powerful essences mix in an uncontrolled reaction.”

In shock, apprehension, and just a tad bit of pants-wetting fear, he

looked back at the vial in his hand.

You have found: Chemical Bomb	Item Class: Rare Durability: 15/15 Weight: 0.5 kg Traits: This device contains distilled celestial and abyssal essence. Combining these two extracts will create an extremely powerful explosion.
--	--

“You,” he began, but had to swallow even though his throat was suddenly very dry, “you gave me a bomb and didn’t tell me?”

“No,” Tabia answered in an annoyed voice, “I just told you. Were you not paying attention?”

Richter carefully set the explosive down, stepped back several paces, then stepped back a few more. After that, he closed his eyes and started counting down from ten. While he did, he recited a mantra that had been very helpful in the past. *Ten, don’t kill her. Nine, she’s pretty useful. Eight, her wife Mimi would probably kill you anyway seeing as she’s a Professed Warrior. Seven, Mimi is pretty hot even though she doesn’t talk much...*

Once he was done with his calming exercise, he looked back at Tabia, “That thing was strong enough to destroy part of a Core building, and you just gave it me to hold?” His voice wasn’t *exactly* calm.

“To be honest, there was a good deal more celestial material and a small amount of abyssal in the cubby as well. I had decided to store most of it in the same place. That,” she added speculatively, “was most likely a mistake.” Richter stared at her in amazement, but she continued undaunted, “The extra raw material near the device magnified the effect of the explosion substantially. The explosion of your device will most likely not be quite as immense.”

“That doesn’t sound very exact,” Richter commented still staring at the device again. He was a bit bugged by the waste of materials, especially *rare* materials like the truesilver rinds, but he didn’t have time to scold Tabia at the moment.

Tabia laughed with no real humor, “It is not. I have no idea exactly how powerful it will be, but I thought that since you are storming an enemy stronghold, you might want a backup plan.”

“Which would be blowing everything up?” he asked in exasperation.

She just looked back at him nonplussed, “I would not recommend blowing up *everything*, my lord. *You* should try to avoid that blast, for instance.”

He glared at her and she relented a bit. “I used stronger vials when assembling these versions of the bombs, so they shouldn’t break easily like

the prototype. You could even toss them a short distance and there shouldn't be an issue... probably," she added under her breath.

Richter could see the value of what she was saying, though he still thought she was a bit explosive-happy. He did ask for one thing to be added and she happened to have a vial of that readily at hand. "Alright, I see what you're saying. How long do I have once I mix them before it explodes?"

Her face took on the same expression that Hisako's had adopted when discussing how long the portal would last. Put another way, a perfect mix of guesstimation, educated guess and utter bullshit, "The acid should eat through the cork in ten to fifteen seconds, and the solution should reach maximum volatility in another five..." She moved her hands up and down like she was a scale weighing something, or jiggling her wife's boobies, before she finally gave him an answer in a questioning tone, "Ten to twenty seconds?"

Richter slapped a hand to his face and started dragging it downward. He didn't start groaning until he heard her next words though, "Plus or minus."

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Richter asked her to make one change to the bombs which Tabia was easily able to accommodate. After that, he placed all the potions into his Bag of Holding, taking extra special care with the chemical bombs, left the cauldron and went back down to the village. Dawn had come and battle was not far behind. Before that happened though, he had a few more Settlement Points left to spend.

Moving the Forge had cost sixty-seven points, leaving him enough to make another building.

Total Settlement Points Remaining: 865

He already knew exactly what he wanted to spend them on. It only took a few minutes to walk over to the House of Scholarship. It was a simple building that was still beautiful, the white stone shining faintly in the dawn

light. The day was still too young for all the village Researchers to be at work, but the Scholars had set cots up inside and normally slept there.

Richter woke them, asking the two to men to follow him outside. They did so with questioning expressions on their faces. In response, Richter smiled and accessed the *Building* tab of the Settlement Point interface.

Know This! Upgrading an existing building will subtract its current worth in Building Points from the final upgrade cost.

House of Scholarship			
Current Level: 1			
Cost (in Building Points) to Upgrade to Level 2:			
<i>Wood: 350 / Plain Stone: 732 / Marbled Quartz: 922</i>			
Cost (in Building Points) to Upgrade to Level 3:			
<i>Wood: 856 / Plain Stone: 1,491 / Marbled Quartz: 1,808</i>			
<i>Effect</i>	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Level 3</i>
Research Speed	+10%	+20%	+30%
Scribing speed and success	+10%	+20%	+30%
Village education, Lore and Lore	+10%	+20%	+30%

acquisition			
Chance to have an Epiphany	+1%	+3%	+5%
Max RPs/day	10%	+25%	+50%
Durability Bonus	No Bonus	No Bonus	+10%
Daily Research Points	N/A	0.1/RP/day per Researcher per Rank	0.2/RP/day per Researcher per Rank
Blueprints, Templates, Recipes, Schematics, etc	N/A	N/A	Research Points can now be used to reverse engineer these magical documents if an example is available. Known magical documents can be advanced using Research Points if the prerequisite tech is known.

Richter couldn't help but smile. The Mist Village was about to get smarter! The bonuses to research speed and education were great. The boost to the maximum RPs the village could generate each day was also good for the future, though they were nowhere near that ceiling yet. Bartle and Bea would definitely enjoy the boost to their Scribing skills, and he was extremely excited to see the boost to Research Points as well.

Three of the new villagers had shown affinity in Research, bringing the number of village researchers up to twelve. Only the Scholars had reached the *initiate* rank in the skill which let them generate 1.5/RPs/skill level/day, while all the *novice* Researchers could only produce two-thirds of that. The level 3 boost meant that the twelve men and women devoted to advancing his settlement's tech would earn another 2.4 RPs/day just thanks to the building. Coupled with the 30% boost to research speed, that really added up.

The last line on the prompt was especially exciting though. He hadn't known what extra benefits advancing the House of Scholarship to level three would bring, but he hadn't expected this! It was an opportunity to advance every Template, Schematic, Recipe and equivalent documents for any crafting type skill. By advancing his research building to level three, he would be giving his village the ability to make Blueprints for any other building. Richter was sure the price in Research Points would probably be

insane, but the point was, they *could* do it now.

Would you like to purchase a **Level 3 House of Scholarship** for 362 Settlement Points? Yes or No?

Hell yeah, he thought with a smile!

Total Settlement Points Remaining: 503

Another dome of mist appeared and a cacophony of hammering, smashing noises and grinding came from inside. Several minutes later, the mists departed and a beautiful two-story building made of gleaming white marble was left in its place. The noise had awakened a fair number of villagers who came out to see what their lord was up to now. They stood with the Scholars examining the marvel the magical mists had left behind. Everyone in the village knew that today was the day they went back to war so the mood was understandably subdued, but Richter still saw a few smiles as they looked at the improved House of Scholarship. He hoped it would remind his people that no matter what happened in the battle, the village had a future.

Congratulations! You have created a Level 3 House of Scholarship.

Your settlement will now enjoy the Building Bonuses of increased Research, Scribing and other Scholarly pursuits from having such a building.

Know This! You have greatly aided your Settlement by creating this **Level 3** building.

+100 Relationship Points with any villagers possessing scholar-aligned skills.

+50 Relationship Points with every other villager.

Know this! A new Job has been revealed: **Wiseman**. Choose wisely who will fill this position.

A new Job, Richter thought excitedly! It was insane how some things were the same no matter what world you were on. When you had money and resources, it was not only easier to succeed, but it also seemed like more opportunities to succeed were just thrown at you. He knew exactly who to choose.

The Scholars were looking at their new building in amazement. He

walked up to Bartle, and laid a hand on the man's shoulder. "I hope you like your new digs," he told the man with a smile.

"My lord, I-" Bartle stopped talking at a loss for words. "I never imagined when my training debt was purchased and I was asked to come to the wilds of the forest that I would see such wonders. Not only have you brought a Dungeon and Core buildings, but, with only a wave of your hand, you have created a level three house of knowledge. I-" he stopped talking again searching Richter's face for long moments. His face firmed and he went down on one knee.

Ritual words of fealty spilled from the man's lips. Bea looked at him with surprise that matched Richter's own, but the other scribe fell to his knee before Bartle's oath was even done. That was a true shock to the chaos seed, until he saw the two men interlace fingers as they spoke. Oh, he thought to himself, realizing he should have guessed before. The two men had always had a Bert and Ernie kind of vibe.

He accepted their oaths and upon Bartle standing, offered him the Job of village Wiseman. Even if the man hadn't been first to bend the knee, the job would still have gone to him. Of the two Scholars, he was by far, less... prickly. Bartle promptly accepted with an excited grin and Richter was notified that their relationship had advanced to *loyal*, the tenth positive rank.

An unexpected benefit to Bartle's new position was that it also pleased Bea. Apparently, the man was so pleased at the honor that had been shown to his beau that Richter's relationship with him improved to rank-nine, *trusted*. Much better than the result the chaos seed had feared of Bea being pissed that he hadn't been given the position. Richter had to wonder if the cascade of events was because of the relationship boost of upgrading the House of Scholarship. Like so many things in The Land though, he'd never know for sure.

Having a village Wiseman offered immediate benefits to the whole settlement.

*Congratulations! You have filled another Job. Bartle is now the village **Wiseman**.*

*His highest ranked science-focused skill is Scribing at the rank of: **Journeyman***

His Profession of Scholar makes him well suited for this task and increases any boons by 100%

+1.2 Research Points generated each day

+12% to village Research speed

+1.5% chance of having an Epiphany

+12% Scribing speed

With the building completed and the awesome new perks from having a Wiseman, which in his opinion was just a bombass name for a Job, he checked the current state of the village's research capabilities.

VILLAGE RESEARCH

Daily Earned Research: 23.79 (20.59 RP/day + 3.2 RP/day)

- 1) **Point per Ley Lines:** 4 Total
- 2) **0.1 Points per level of Research Skill*:** 9.3 *Normal research restrictions apply
- 3) **Wiseman:** 1.2

Research Rate Modifiers:

House of Scholarship (Level 3): +30%

Wiseman: +12%

0.2 RPs/Researcher/Research Rank/Day: +3.2

Current Research: Construction I

Current Progress: 22.09/132 RPs

Time to Completion: 4 days 14 hours 52 minutes 49 seconds

Advancing the building to level three had nearly doubled the RPs the village made every day. He was absolutely sure he'd spent those points wisely. He was also super excited that upgrading the House of Scholarship had cost him much less than he had thought it would, thanks to the original Building Point cost of the level one version being deducted. The wooden hut would let him deduct two hundred and fifty-two points from the final cost. It

meant he still had enough Settlement Points to make another purchase. Considering the deal he'd just made with Krom, he was pretty sure his life expectancy would be greatly improved by doing something nice for Sumiko.

He left the Scholars behind and ran over to the Healer's Hut. It looked more like a stone wall-white tent hybrid than anything else. Peeking inside, he saw the beds were all empty and only a few healers were present. Sumiko was there as well, giving last minute orders to her people. Battle wouldn't just be busy for the warriors. Unfortunately, there would be a good deal of wounded as well, and that was part of the best-case scenario. He prayed his people would make it back to be healed. The alternative meant laying more good men and women down for their final rest.

The Healer did not take being asked to leave her own building nearly as well as the Scholars had. Richter was almost forced to order her outside before she agreed. Once she had though, he wasted no time.

Know This! Upgrading an existing building will subtract its current worth in Building Points from the final upgrade cost.

Healer's Hut

Current Level: 0

Cost (in Building Points) to Upgrade to a Level 1 House of Healing:

Wood: 461 / Plain Stone: 597 / Marbled Quartz: 664

Cost (in Building Points) to Upgrade to a Level 2 House of Healing:

Wood: 1003 / Plain Stone: 1,410 / Marbled Quartz: 1,633

Cost (in Building Points) to Upgrade to a Level 3 House of Healing:

Wood: 1,495 / Plain Stone: 2,148 / Marbled Quartz: 2,480

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Level 0</i>	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Level 3</i>
Village Health	5%	10%	20%	30%
Disease Prevention	5%	10%	20%	30%
Recuperation Speed after Injury	5%	10%	20%	30%
Bonus to Healing Potions, Magics, etc			+10%	+20%
Bonus to Population Growth			+10%	+20%
Building Durability				+10%
Villager Hit Points				+10%

Richter chose a level three building made entirely of marbled quartz. Minutes later, a new building appeared.

Total Settlement Points Remaining: 7

It had almost wiped out every remaining Settlement Point, but he was sure it was worth it. In the next few minutes, Richter discovered just how important advancing the buildings of his settlement could be.

Congratulations! You have created a **Level 3 House of Healing**. Your settlement will now enjoy the Building Bonus of increased Health, Population Growth and Hit Points allotted from having such a building.

Know This! You have greatly aided your Settlement by creating this **Level 3** building.

+100 Relationship Points with any villagers possessing healing skills.

+50 Relationship Points with every other villager.

Then a prompt appeared that inverted the normal colors of his village prompts, something he had never seen before. When he read it, his mouth

dropped open in shock.

Know This! You have built a Leveled building that exemplifies one of the four Powers your village is built upon. For reaching the third level of this building the bonus is **3x** higher.

Life Magic is an *Unusual* or *Scarce* skill, depending on race and other factors, making the normally occurring incidence of a person being born with an affinity greater than 50% in the skill 1 out of every 100 or 1,000 individuals respectively.

The presence of the Quickening may affect this in days to come if the ambient magic increases sufficiently, but this has not occurred yet.

For creating a Level 3 House of Healing over a Life Place of Power your village is given the following boons:

- 1) The incidence of those being born with an affinity greater than 50% in Life magic has increased by a factor of 3.
- 2) Every villager with Life magic has their Life Magic skill affinity increased by +15%
- 3) Every villager with Life magic gains 3 levels in Life Magic

Advancing this building in level again will increase these boons.

No more than one building can be used to exemplify each Power in a Settlement.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 17, 18, and 19 in **Life Magic**. New spells are now available.*

Know This! Increasing any affinity above 100% will trigger an automatic increase in skill level. This increase will continue, decreasing the total affinity by 10% per level, until your affinity is 100% or less.

Know This! Increasing your affinity in Life magic by 15% awards you a further 2 skill levels in Life magic.

*Congratulations! You have reached skill levels 20 and 21 in **Life Magic**. New spells are now available.*

*You have received 5,000 (base 4,000 x 1.25) bonus experience for reaching level 20 in the skill: **Life Magic**.*

Sumiko and Richter looked at one another in astonishment. He hadn't been expecting any of this was delighted. His reaction was nothing compared to the Healer's, however. Tears began to fall down her face. She embraced him, burying her head into his armored chest.

“Thank you,” she told him, weeping tears of joy. “I never thought I would advance my Life magic again. Even the fruit of the Quickening did not do this, but you did! When I reached skill level one hundred, my affinity was only 49%. I should not have been able to advance, but with decades of

the Hearth Mother's aid and personal guidance, I finally became a *master*. Bonding with my Life pixie greatly increased my affinity, but I still might have spent years to advance only a single level. You, my lord, have made an abandoned dream come true, not only once, but three times!" Love and dedication lay in her gaze.

*Lord Richter! You have fulfilled the most **Heartfelt Desire** of **Sumiko**. In doing so you have gained the maximum number of Relationship Points possible for a single action. +250,000 Relationship Points with Sumiko. Total Relationship Points: +311,154*

*Congratulations! Your relationship with Sumiko has improved from **Loyal (+55,000)** to **Soul Blooded (+250,000)**. Sumiko will fight by your side unto death, and if she can ever find her way back through the veil, she will fight for you again.*

Richter had no idea all this was going to happen. Other prompts showed more relationship boosts with every other biomancer in the village, though none nearly as profound as Sumiko's. He also received prompts showing that the village-wide health boost had pleased his entire people and further ensured their loyalty.

Know This! Your people have all benefited from your choices with a boost to their health of +10%. Their Morale and Loyalty will change to reflect this.

+50 *Morale Points for increasing the Health of your villagers by +10%*

Base: +1,131 x 1.84 (+25% Undefeated x +41% Administrator x +10%

Health x -2% Crime x +10% Vassal State)

Total Morale Points: +2,081

+20 *Loyalty Points for increasing the Health of your villagers by +10%*

Base: +2,398 x 1.86 (+25% Undefeated x +41% Administrator x +10%

Health x +10% Vassal State)

Total Loyalty Points: +4,460

“I will fight with you through death,” Sumiko told him with an almost zealous fire in her eyes.

For once, Richter didn’t make a joke, “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I only need to know if you are ready for what comes next?”

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Sumiko nodded and called for her biomancers to walk with her to the Dungeon. Richter stopped her though, saying there was a better way. They all gathered around him and he cast *Dungeon Transport*. Nine seconds later, he, Alma and the healers appeared next to the Well of Offering. Roswan was waiting.

“There are too many people in the Dungeon,” the elf stated without preamble.

Richter couldn’t say he was wrong. Hisako’s sprite army and the Mist Village’s own force had already started to fill the Entrance Chamber. More were arrayed on the ramp leading to the surface. All were steely-eyed and ready for whatever the day would bring. Almost none knew the full extent of the plan, but that did not matter. Every man and woman in the allied forces was ready to once again fight for their lord and lady.

The Dungeon Master looked at his Dungeon Keeper, “Don’t get your

knickers in a twist. I've got a little gift for you too." He converted the seven remaining Settlement Points into Dungeon Points to be used at Roswan's discretion. The mustache wiggled in appreciation. After hearing a contented *grrmm*, Richter told him, "Come on."

The two men and Sumiko walked through the shimmering energy field into the Dungeon proper. A moment later, they were in the inner room of the Barbican. As soon as they walked inside, a warning prompt appeared in Richter's vision.

WARNING

You have now exceeded the maximum occupancy of this Room. Reduce the total occupants to **50** or less within the next **7** minutes or the Barbican's gates will be opened and all bonuses suspended.

"Greetings, my lord," Terrod greeted him, unknowingly echoing the prompt. Sion just nodded. They were both fully armed and armored. They, as well as every other person in the Barbican, had also received the Dungeon's warning. "Before anything else, please know how much I appreciate you providing us with the barracks. I have not seen it personally yet, but my men have told me it is a sight to behold!"

“No less than you deserve, my friend,” Richter responded, “but let’s celebrate it after we kick some zombie butt, huh?”

A smile creased Terrod’s face, “Quite right, my lord.” He went back into report mode, “The Barbican has thirty guards and twenty meidon sprites, including myself and First Meidon Sion. I believe having you in the Room will exceed the maximum occupancy, however.”

“No time to waste,” Richter agreed, nodding. “It won’t be a problem in a moment, though. Follow me to the battlements.”

They all walked up the steps and out to the front of the battlements. Terrod had already started stocking it with spare bundles of arrows and barrels of oil and water. The captain would not take part in the assault through the portal, something he had argued long and hard against. When Richter had made it clear that the captain’s place was to safeguard the village though, he had bowed his head in assent and committed himself fully to the task.

He had even brought the scorpion ballista that had been made for Shiovana’s ship and had rigged a brace for it. It sat in one corner and could easily be swiveled to cover the area in front of the Barbican. Richter gave the captain his thanks. Terrod saluted back, saying nothing. To the captain, this was his responsibility and he would see it done, praise or no.

Once they were overlooking the sea of red columns, Richter also saw that his tamed maunder was still standing in the same place, awaiting his command. It might have been his imagination, but he thought he saw hate behind the creature's eyes. True or not, it was still under the thrall of his Blood Magic for the next several hours. As he checked the barrier though, it felt... unstable compared to the last time. Contrarily, the maunder's true consciousness was not railing against the wall of Deeper Magic like last time. Instead, it just looked out quietly, almost like it was waiting.

Richter shook his head. The Blood magic would hold. It had to. Even if his control was weakening, it only needed to last another hour. After that it wouldn't matter. No matter how the battle played out, the Labyrinth creature would not be returning to the village. A few jenit prowlers and koran tuskars loitered in front of the Barbican, but none approached the gates. To Richter's eyes, there was nothing out of place and no reason to wait. He accessed the interface for the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent. The old options were there, but at the top was a new tile called *Call of the Dungeon*. He mentally selected it.

Greetings, Dungeon Master Richter. You may use your 1 **Call of the Dungeon** to marshal the forces of the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent to fight on your behalf for one day and one day only.

Do you wish to do so now? *Yes or No?*

Without hesitation, Richter chose “Yes.” A massive *HISS* filled the air and every monster currently living in the Dungeon made its way to the central chamber

CALL OF THE DUNGEON

The following changes are in effect for **1 day**:

All forces that you mark as **friendly** or **neutral** will be immune to traps and monsters of the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent.

As Dungeon Master, you may command these forces, though their level of compliance will be contingent on the intelligence of the forces you now control.

As Dungeon Master, you may give others control of these forces as well.

No **Loot** or **Resources** can be claimed by any **friendly** or **neutral** forces until the Call has elapsed. Any attempt to do so will negate that individual’s immunity.

All occupancy limits are suspended.

Dungeon Forces at your disposal:

2 Chupacabras: Levels 21-22

42 Jenit Prowlers: Levels 10-17

41 Koran Tuskers: Levels 8-15

Due to the Call of the Dungeon, the Warning regarding the Barbican occupancy is suspended.

Richter looked at Terrod, and gave a simple command, “Bring everyone.” Then he gave command of the Dungeon forces to Terrod, Caulder, the two Mist Village corporals Ox and Schroeder, Sion and the sprite’s second in command, Kentyiro. Yoshi and Hisako were also given the ability to control the beasts.

Thirty minutes later, the battlements were fully manned. The rest of the allied forces were in the courtyard below and were also arrayed in front of the Barbican. Nearly a hundred monsters loitered nearby along with several hundred warriors of the Hearth Tree and Mist Village. The soldiers sent many nervous looks at the century of bloodthirsty beasts standing only a few yards away, but they retained their composure and trusted their commanders. The same commanders who were listening to Hisako go through the battle

plan for a final time.

“The decaemur knight will open the portal. It will most likely be destroyed instantly, but I will gain control of the portal as soon as it is opened. Once the gateway is stabilized, it might connect instantly to the lich’s domain or it might take a few seconds. I cannot know beforehand. I hope that it will deposit you at the top of the Mausoleum, but if it does not, you will have to fight your way to the top while you keep the hordes below from swarming you from behind.”

“I have something that might help with that,” Richter told her. He showed them the Flammable Life Oil. “It causes eighty-five points of damage a second, and it does a whole lot more against Death creatures. By my calculations, the undead should lose almost three hundred points per second. Only problem is that it won’t last long. After I go through, I’ll smash a few of these on the steps behind us. Once I light it on fire, it should slow down the undead climbing the steps to get to us.”

“That is a good thought, but do not use them all at once. The memory you shared showed more staircases on at least two other sides of the pyramid. Blocking the staircase nearest to you will buy you time, but you will still have to move quickly. If you are there too long, they will flank and overwhelm you.”

“That’s why I’m counting on Mr Key to the City there,” Richter motioned to the mauler. “I have a few other ideas as well.”

“Very good,” Hisako stated, grabbing the reins of the conversation again. “After the portal is open, Lord Richter will send the Labyrinth monster through the portal and will follow with a small group of fighters. Remember, the goal is to kill the lich, not to destroy his entire army. If the passage of the first wave of fighters does not have too much of a detrimental effect then we will send the Dungeon beasts through to attack.”

This was a small point of contention, and Hisako raised her concerns to Richter a final time, “I completely agree that using your Call of the Dungeon to open the portal here is wise. There is always a chance that the lich’s forces might try to cross through here and, if the worst occurs, we can hold them off from the Barbican. As many benefits as there are to opening the portal here, however, I still question the wisdom of sending the Dungeon’s beasts through the portal as the second wave of attackers. You must remember that every person who crosses through the gateway will decrease the time I can keep it open. Every beast you send through increases the risk that you will be left on the other side with thousands of undead.” Her eyes flicked to her son, “That all of you will be left there. The damage a level twelve beast can inflict is much less than any one of my warriors. Might it not be more prudent to only send our strongest warriors?”

She and Richter had already had this argument. He couldn't deny that she was right. A Professed Sprite Warrior would definitely worth more than the Dungeon beasts, but the beasts were replaceable. The men and women of the allied forces were not. Richter knew that the lich had to be destroyed, but if he could have completed the mission risking no other life than his own, he would have. The chaos seed had grown a great deal though, and had finally learned he could not handle every problem himself, and that when he tried, others could still get hurt. He would lead his people and his allies into battle, but he would do everything he could to keep them alive. If that meant using the Dungeon monsters as battle fodder, he was only sorry there were not more of them to sacrifice. The other bonus was that while the beasts would worsen the portal's instability, it was a one-way trip for them, and they would not need to factor in the effect of a return journey.

Hisako was completely right about the beasts being outclassed though. The undead in Nien's memory looked formidable. They didn't have any information on the enemy's exact levels, but they had been chosen to guard the Mausoleum out of the thousands of undead that were nearby. There was no doubt in any of their minds that the lich's guardians would be extremely tough. In contrast, some of the Dungeon beasts were only level eight. Richter had already thought about that though, and had taken steps to even the odds.

“I’ve had Roswan smearing Sun Lotus Poison on all of their tusks, spines, claws and quills. It will do fifty to seventy damage a second to any undead that get infected, if that’s the right word, for fifteen seconds. I agree that the beasts probably won’t last long, but if they do any damage at all, they might take some high level undead down with them.”

Hisako nodded, “Very well. As I said, I am hoping that the portal opens at the top of the Mausoleum, but we are changing the spell slightly by forcing it open for an extended period. No matter where it appears, you must use part of your forces to protect it at all costs. If you lose that position, even if you destroy the lich, you may not be able to return.”

Richter nodded. She had made that point abundantly clear before. That was why there were four ten-ton blocks of marbled quartz in front of the Barbican and forty mist workers to move them. There were also a collection of small boulders and ten more mist workers to carry those. If they were going to appear at the top of the Mausoleum, there was no reason he shouldn’t make gravity work for him and send the enemies below a few presents.

The chaos seed had described the metal structure of the Mausoleum to Zarr and asked if the dwarf could make some sort of wall to keep the undead army back, if only for a little while. The geomancer said he could affect the shape of metal, but that it was much harder to use that medium than stone. In

this particular case, it might also be impossible as the metal in question was part of a Core building.

They had come up with another option. The dwarf said he could slightly alter the shapes of even large blocks of stone a small amount without too much difficulty. He could soften the bottoms of the marbled quartz blocks so that they could conform to the shape of the steps. He could even make a magic mortar that would bind them there for a short time.

From the image in Nien's memory, they had guesstimated that the central stairway was about twenty feet across. Each of the white stones was five feet by four by three. If Zarr could get them in place, then the allied forces could establish a combat fort to defend the portal. It would only offer protection from the undead climbing up the stairway, but seeing as how the several thousand-strong undead army would be somewhere below them, it was definitely worth doing.

The only problem was that none of them knew if the Mausoleum would inhibit Zarr's Earth magic. Both Earth and Water bordered Life magic in the Basic Element mandala, and so either could be inhibited by the Core building's powers. If that turned out to be the case, the Mage would be almost helpless and had no place in this battle. They just had to hope that was not the case, because if Zarr couldn't help, then it might come down to hand-to-hand combat against thousands of undead. Only time would tell.

“Are you ready, Zarr?” Richter asked simply.

The dwarf looked back silently, the weight of his responsibility clear in his eyes. Richter could see the hesitation and doubt, but then Zarr received what all heroes need. Someone they can’t afford to disappoint. “Of course, he is,” Quasea answered for him placing her hand in his. Zarr looked back at her with an expression that left no doubt about the burgeoning romance between the two of them.

“Of course, I am,” Zarr echoed, meeting Richter’s gaze, his voice sure and strong.

Hisako nodded and continued, “The rest of our forces will remain behind and will only enter the portal if needed. The most important thing is speed. You must hurry. In addition to the portal’s instability, remember that I will be draining mana from my people to fuel the spell. The longer you take, the more I must drain them. If I drain too much, the mana deficit will not only prevent them from imbuing their arrows, but it will also make it hard for them to think.”

Richter knew exactly what she was talking about. Bottoming out your mana was like a tequila hangover. It was a “bad experience.” Hisako met the eyes of everyone gathered to make sure they understood her. Once she was satisfied, she reached into her robes and withdrew a small plant. It

was a green sprig with two leaves sprouting from it. Both were round and slightly concave. Richter's Herb Lore skill triggered.

<p>You have found:</p> <p>Twinleaf of Zanlu Tree</p>	<p>Durability: 7/7</p> <p>Herb Class: Scarce</p> <p>Herb Quality: Succulent</p> <p>Weight: 0.03 kg</p> <p>Uses:</p> <p><i>Novice:</i> Can aid against sonic attacks</p> <p><i>Initiate:</i> Component of an itch salve</p> <p><i>Apprentice:</i> When separated and ingested, allows for psychic long-distance communication</p>
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“You have *got* to give me one of these trees when we're done,” Richter told her. She had just given the strike force comms!

A faint smile creased her serious face. “That can be arranged.”

“Just how much distance are we talking here?” Richter asked, looking at leaves.

“That is dependent on the Herb Lore skill of those involved. My own is *master* rank and so herbs are 312% more effective. You are an *apprentice*,

correct?” Richter nodded; it was his second-most advanced skill at level forty. “Then, factoring in the *succulent* quality of the leaves, it will allow us to communicate across several miles for several hours. More than enough in both distance and time to use during the battle, but only as long as the portal is open. Once it closes,”

“My black butt better be back,” Richter interrupted with a smirk. Even on the eve of battle, alliteration was fun.

“Quite,” she said told him, with a faint smile. She explained that Richter just had to think of the person he wanted to address and the herb would carry his thoughts. She only had two more of the *scarce* herb which she used to make a bond between herself and Yoshi, and between Yoshi and Richter. Testing them out, they worked perfectly, though the mental communication had a distinctly different “flavor” than what he could do with his Psi Bond.

“Well then,” Richter pronounced. “The time has come.”

A few minutes later, Richter had handed out the potions to the initial strike force. Unfortunately, there were only enough health potions for most of the fighters to receive one each. He also gave a special bottle to Sion with very specific instructions. The sprite had looked at him like he was crazy, but had agreed and accepted the item.

While that was happening, Yoshi formed a warband. The half-sprite's *journeyman* rank in War Leader made him a Battle Leader, allowing him to lead hundreds of fighters. This time though, the attack squad was only twenty strong. It included Yoshi, his second-in-command Damien, Richter, Caulder, Sion, Kentyiro, the Mist Village Warriors, the Rogue Hanso and two of the village's Mages, Quasea and Zarr. The rest of the party were made up of sprite Professionals that had undergone the Uddo Rengai, the Hearth Tree's equivalent of special forces training. Terrod's jaw was tight watching the war party form and being excluded from it, but the man would do his duty.

All conversation ceased as a grumbling and almost tearful Beyan walked through the Barbican with his undead pet in tow. Sumiko handed over the finger bone of eldritch magic. Beyan looked at her in anger, blaming her for the loss of his decaemur knight. What he saw in her face disarmed him though. For once, there was no derision when she looked at the necromancer. Seeing the pain the Death mage was in, she felt nothing but sympathy. Richter hadn't really considered that Beyan might be emotionally attached to the decaemur knight, but seeing the gnome now, he realized he should have. The knight had been Beyan's loyal companion through many battles. Richter had emotionally bonded with the shale adder and still missed it. Why couldn't a necromancer bond with an undead?

As upset as Beyan was, he didn't hesitate to do what he had agreed to, for the good of the village and for his liege. He gave the bone to the knight and had it walk forward, until it was almost obscured by a column. Then he gave it a final order. It looked at the glowing green bone in its hand. For a moment, nothing happened. Then it was silently enveloped in green flames and the Dungeon filled with the sounds of torment.

A wailing like the keening of tortured souls filled the air, seeming to come from the skeleton's gaping mouth. It stood there, burning and screaming, as a ragged line of neon green energy appeared in front of the knight. Every member of the allied forces cringed and several of the beasts wet themselves in fear. The only person completely undaunted was the Hearth Mother.

She looked down from her place atop the battlements and raised both hands. Her expression was implacable, allowing for neither doubt nor failure. Though she stood only four feet tall, her presence towered over them all. The air was thrumming with energy, a feeling that spiked as twin beams of golden Life energy shot from her fingers towards the rent in space. It writhed, like a living thing seeking escape, but soon began to stabilize. The neon green color of the rip began to soften and gold tinges could be seen here there. Through it all, the decaemur knight had stood in place, its bones blackening in the eldritch flame. Then, all of a sudden, the bones of the

decaemur knight exploded outward, small shards flying in every direction. The undead had been utterly destroyed. From its unnatural life essence, the portal to the Mausoleum was born.

In the first second, it was as tall as a man. In the next, it was as high as the battlements. A moment later, it shrunk to four feet in height. All that could be seen inside of it was a chaotic sea of green energy that was occasionally tinged with gold. The portal kept fluctuating, but as Hisako poured more magic into the gateway, the neon green of eldritch magic was slowly replaced with the warm gold of Life. The doorway began to stabilize and a faint but fetid stink poured through it into the cavern. The scent of death filled everyone's mouths and nostrils. Sumiko raised her arms as well, and two more beams of Life energy struck the gate, anchoring the magic on their plane.

Richter's attention was laser-focused on the portal, but he still couldn't ignore it when Futen suddenly flared with light and a prompt appeared in his vision.

Your actions have led to an update to the Quest: **Unlock your Power III**

By opening a portal to challenge the eldritch lich Singh, you have contested one of the greatest threats in your domain. The ripples of this action will spread through the River Peninsula and perhaps the world, but

one thing cannot be denied. If you are successful, it will change the balance of power in this region and will awaken one, perhaps both, of your remaining Powers! You are committed. This Quest cannot be refused!

Success Conditions: Defeat the Lich.

Optional Success Conditions:

Deliver the Final Death to the Lich.

Destroy the source of his Power.

Reward: Unlock 1 or 2 of your Powers.

Penalty for failure or refusal of Quest: Cannot be refused.

Fare thee well, Master of the Mist Village!

Really, Richter thought to himself. Now?

That was what Richter wanted to ask Futen, but there was no more time for questions. Hisako spoke into his mind via the power of the twinleaf, **Be ready! The portal will stabilize any second!**

He dismissed the quest prompt, not even having time to think about the repercussions of killing the lich, of what it would mean for his people, of the new dangers and monsters it would bring. What he had to focus on now was the danger the lich posed. That was all he had time for.

I'm ready, he responded to Hisako, his mental voice strong and unyielding. They weren't idle words. No matter what the portal would ultimately show, he would meet it head on. The gateway was barely fluctuating now and seemed to be stabilizing at about fifteen feet in height. Richter prepared to rush through with his bow in hand, but then a thought occurred to him. A question that he might never be able to ask again. **Hisako,** he mentally projected. **I have to know something.**

Her response was tight with strain, but also softened by love and respect. She knew he might never come back through the portal, and if he needed to share final words, then she would listen, **What is it, my ally?**

Richter paused for just a moment before asking, **That curse you cast on me the night before the party, when you made all the soul stones, that wasn't real, right?**

Now! You want to discuss this now?! her voice was a whistling shout in his mind. Only the Universe knew that she was apeing his own sentiments of just moments before.

I need to know if you did something to me as a joke, but forgot to reverse it. I'm going into battle!

She sent the psychic equivalent of an irritated grumble, but still answered, **It was only a jest. The magic was real, but all it did was negate*

*the effects of any herbs you would have taken for the next twelve hours.**

Richter sighed in relief. He had been pretty sure she'd been joking, but sprites had a real weird sense of humor. He focused back on the portal, which, with a flash of light, stabilized and locked into position. Through the gateway, he could see a view of grey metal steps, so dark they were almost black. Nothing else could be seen. He realized the portal must not be upright but was at angle. It was the kind of irritating, real-life detail that they just never accounted for on Stargate. Still the gateway was ready and there was a battle to be fought.

With a shouted, "For the Mist!" he ordered the mauler through the portal and jumped through himself. As he cleared the portal, Hisako's last words echoed again in his mind and, for the first time, true fear gripped his heart.

Oh shit! The star zenia!

CHAPTER 99 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



When Richter landed on the steps, the mauler was already roaring, and he had no more time to worry about contraception. The Labyrinth monster had already been struck with two arrows. While that would have been completely ignored by Richter's pet, eldritch energy was worming out from each wound. The arrows were obviously enchanted and were causing more damage every second.

Alma launched herself into the air. Her wings flapped quickly and soon her black armor made her impossible to spot against the ceiling high above. As she flew, she fed everything she saw to Richter, giving him another perspective as he quickly took stock. Above and behind the Mausoleum, he could see the cruel-faced statue of what Hisako had thought was an Exile, a member of either the Light or Dark Court, towering above them all. Neon green magic was being siphoned off each of the four arms and was accumulating in a massive ball of snapping energy in front of it.

That was all less important than the fact that he quickly saw that the portal had *not* opened near the roof of the Mausoleum. The portal had let out on the grey metal steps between the seventh and eighth floor, *three* levels from the top. To be specific, the gateway had appeared almost at a forty-five degree angle to the stairs and was three feet above them. The drop was easily handled, but the fact that they now had to fight through three levels of undead was a problem! In addition to coming to terms with their position, he also let a series of prompts wash over him, internalizing the information in a moment.

*Know This! You have entered the influence of the **Mausoleum of Saginald!***

*-100% Spell Strength to **Life** magic*

*-50% Spell Strength to **Earth** and **Water** magic*

*-25% Spell Strength to **Light** magic*

*+100% Spell Strength to **Death** magic*

*+50% Spell Strength to **Fire** and **Air** magic*

*+25% Spell Strength to **Dark** magic*

Richter gritted his teeth, thinking about how Zarr was going to have a hard time making the bulwark with a 50% spell penalty. It would be possible, but exceedingly difficult. Difficult or not, now was not the time for worry. It was a time for action.

Attack! he shouted into the mauler's mind, bare seconds after they had crossed through the gateway. His command sent the Labyrinth boss barreling up the stairs. The giant monster bellowed as it raced up the stairs to do battle. Hulking zombies the size of gorillas raced down to meet it while archers from the level above continued to fire arrows. Richter drew a poisoned arrow of his own while the rest of the strike team poured through the portal. Sighting on a level 28 Professed Mage, he released, a faint golden aura surrounding the arrow. It streaked up the stairs, crossing the space in a blink, but the skeletal Mage was already prepared. A previously invisible, 4th-tier spell shield of Death energy sprang into visibility the moment the arrow tip came in contact with the barrier.

The spell had over six hundred HPs and a defense of +15. All of that was doubled by the Mausoleum's influence. The defensive magic effectively gave the mage the equivalent of a concrete-reinforced bunker. Any attack with a damage value less than fifteen wouldn't even deplete the spell's health. It would protect the undead Mage from attacks and allow the wretched creature to destroy whatever was attacking it at its leisure. That was why Richter got to enjoy seeing its mouth drop open in shock as his arrow passed through its spell barrier unimpeded, right before it blew up in the mage's unarmored face!

The last several days, Richter hadn't just spent his time enchanting.

He had spent it experimenting. At the time, he'd wondered if it was a function of his increased Creativity, because ideas had started exploding in his mind. Whatever the cause, when this particular notion had occurred to him, he knew he'd stumbled onto something special.

One of the few things he already knew about magic shields was that they were not effective against magics of the same type. A Fire shield could not stop a *Fireball* spell, for instance. He'd run that concept by Hisako who told him that there were shield variations this did not hold true for, but that many magic shields did follow that axiom.

Knowing that, he'd wondered what would happen if he shot a magic shield with an arrow enchanted with the same type of magic. Awesomely and surprisingly, it had worked! Hisako had helped him test the theory by casting a stationary Life shield over a rock. While an unenchanted arrow was deflected, an arrow enchanted with *Life Attack* passed right through! Even an imbued arrow would pass right through the shield as long as the arrow was enspelled with Life magic. According to Hisako, this was because the force magic of the Imbue Arrow skill didn't adhere to any particular spell school.

That was when he'd started wondering what would happen if there were two enchantments on the arrow. He expected to be fighting Death magi as the Mausoleum was an undead stronghold. It was all well and good to have an arrow enspelled with Death magic pass through a magic shield, but

the enchantment might actually make an undead stronger, with the damage the arrow itself caused wholly negated. He needed to add a little extra *umph* to the attack.

The first experiment with an arrow dual enchanted with *Life Attack* and *Dark Attack* had been a total failure. The arrow failed to pass through. The second experiment had literally exploded as soon as the arrow had been enchanted. The high steel arrow simply couldn't take the opposing energies of *Life Attack* and *Death Attack*. After apologizing to the smiths that had been glaring at him, he'd moved onto a third possibility, using an arrow with *Life Attack* and *Sonic Damage*. It was unfortunately another failure. The arrows simply wouldn't penetrate Hisako's Life shield.

Richter had been more than frustrated, but that was when Hisako had reminded him of the mandala. Her shield was comprised of Life magic. The two Basic Elements most closely associated with Life were Earth and Water. He'd pointed out that he had already tried to use *Sonic Damage*, which was an Earth enchantment, but Hisako had already anticipated that objection. She'd proposed that for the arrows to pass through a Life shield then the enchantment had to be identified as Life as well. Richter's previous experiment had tried ensPELLing the arrow with an expensive level two Earth magic while only using a level one Life magic as the other half of the enchantment.

Happily, and maddeningly, the Hearth Mother had been right, as always. Richter found that as long as the Enchantment Points he invested into *Life Attack* were greater than or equal to the points he invested into an Earth or Water enchantment, the arrow could still pass right through the shield! He'd even found he could use spell types that were two removed from Life and still penetrate the spell shield, as long as the ratio was then 75% Life and 25% Light or Dark.

Fire and Air magic did not work in any combination to get through a Life shield, but that was not what he needed to attack the undead. Both of those magics did border Death on the mandala and they were exactly what he needed to pierce a necromancer's shield. That was why he'd spent some precious TPs to buy the enchantment *Fire Attack*, and that was why the skeleton caster was having a bad fucking day!

He drew another arrow and checked the results of his first attack.

BEGIN COMBAT LOG

Richter strikes Skeletal Necromancer's 4th-tier Death Shield with Enchanted Imbued Moonstone Arrow.

Death Fire Moonstone Arrow bypasses Skeletal Necromancer's Enhanced Static Shield.

*Richter strikes a **Skeletal Necromancer** for 272 points of varied damage with an Death Fire Moonstone Arrow: [(+17 Recurve Bow of the Wood Sprite + 8 Moonstone Arrow + 38% for level 19 Archery + 76% for 38 points of Dexterity) + (56 Mana/5 + 90% for level 18 Imbue Arrow + 43% familiar level – 15% Necromancer’s Wisdom) + 0 **Death Damage** (Target Immune) + **Fire Damage**: (+8 Fire Enchantment + 50% undead weakness to Fire – 15% Necromancer’s Wisdom)] x 3 Critical hit (head)*

6-foot radius AoE Force Damage: 26

***Skeletal Necromancer** has been **Poisoned** with Sun Lotus Poison! It will take 53 points of Life Damage/second for the next 15 seconds!*

***Skeletal Necromancer** resists **Mind Fog**.*

***Skeletal Necromancer** resists **Stun**.*

***Skeletal Necromancer** resists **Psi Crystallization**.*

END COMBAT LOG

All of the information washed over Richter in an instant thanks to Randolphus’s status window technique. The Mage fell back, its jaw knocked clean off and the Life poison coursing through its undead body. The chaos seed used *Analyze* again and saw that in the opening salvo of the battle he had

removed more than 80% of its life and that the poison would finish the job in seconds. Richter's face was fixed in a rictus of battle lust. That's right, muthafuckas! Feel the power of Essence Enchanting!

In the two seconds it had taken him to both attack and register the damage, the other twenty members of the squad had traveled through the portal and the battle was joined. Wisteria went down with an arrow in her shoulder, screaming as the foul poison on the arrowhead began to course through her body. Two of the Hearth Tree sprites dropped as well, one with an arrow in his eye and another from a bolt of Death magic that knocked him unconscious. Yoshi didn't deviate from the plan. Instead, the half-sprite shouted "Foresuto No!" and sprinted up the stairs, the warband racing after him.

Richter held his to his own part of the plan. Dropping his bow for a moment, he drew vials of Flammable Life Oil from his Bag even as he examined the forces arrayed against them. The Mausoleum had ten floors before the top level, each smaller than the one below it. As he had expected, the number of defenders decreased with each tier, but the levels of the monsters increased.

The undead on the seventh floor had noticed the invasion, and the melee fighters were beginning to rush up the stairs even as the archers raced into position so they could fire on Richter. Using *Analyze*, he saw that the

monsters on the seventh floor looked to have levels between twenty-two and twenty-seven while those above him were levels twenty-six through thirty.

He relayed all of this to Hisako as he continued to smash enough oil vials to coat the width of the stairs several yards down from the portal. The undead of the sixth level had already made it halfway up the stairs. He ran back up, trailing the last bit of oil from the vial in his hand. Richter waited one more second, letting the undead get fully within the AoE of the oil, then with a malevolent look in his eyes, spat a word of Power.

“Igni!”

Orange flame shot from his fingertips into the oil at his feet as he cast *Weak Flame*. The clear liquid caught fire and raced down the steps in a line before igniting the large swath of oil he’d placed on the stairs. A conflagration twenty yards long and five yards wide sprung into existence and caught ten undead in the flames. Armored ghouls, zombie knights and skeletal Warriors were all caught in his trap and began to burn.

Richter unsheathed Black Ice and his elementum short sword, preparing to meet the charge. A skeleton holding a black steel mace made it through the flames but still burned as it ran at the chaos seed. Despite the fact that blades were not the ideal weapon to fight monsters of this type, his powerful instruments more than compensated. Spinning low, Richter ducked

under the undead Warrior's attack and brought his green elementum blade against the skeleton's right leg; an instant later he sliced Black Ice into the left. Both weapons cut clean through the Life-weakened bones of the skeleton, dropping it to the ground.

With a savage kick, Richter shot his skeeling boot into its torso and sent it tumbling down the steps into the flames. A horrible moan to his right heralded a six-foot-tall zombie beastkin moving as fast, if not faster, than it could have in life. With talons extended, it lunged at him, swinging its arm in a vicious swipe. He raised his elementum blade just in time and braced himself.

The fey metal bit into the zombie's left arm, and the force of the blow knocked Richter back a step. Yanking down and twisting, the hand came free and the zombie howled, either in anger, pain, or both. Its other hand reached forward to grab Richter's armor, but it moaned anew when it came in contact with the Life-enchanted metal. It drew back, its hand smoking, and Richter grinned broadly. Swinging like he was letting the big dog eat from the blue tees, Black Ice swept up into the zombie's crotch, splitting it from tooter to rooter! The two burning halves fell to either side and Richter engaged the next undead that had made it through the flames.

As he desperately parried an axe blow, Richter called to Hisako to send the Dungeon beasts and Zarr. Even though there were only fifteen

undead on the level below them and twelve above, there were thousands of green-eyed dead in the lich's army. They had started surging across the land bridge that connected the Mausoleum to the plain where the army had waited. Every defender from the lower levels was rushing up the stairs as well. Even the Life oil flames were not stopping all of them, the dumber undead rushing straight through them. They had to do this quickly!

The portal is stable enough to send the beasts,* Hisako thought to him, *but the strain of holding it open is worse than I thought! Even drawing on the mana of my people I will not be able to hold it open long. You must hurry!

What does she think I'm doing, Richter asked, diving to the side to miss an arrow shot from above. Thanking Alma for warning him from overwatch, he savagely hacked at a ghast holding a mace and buckler. Purple-black energy danced over the undead's weapon and Richter *Identify* Talent showed that the weapon was enspelled with a disease enchantment. He didn't let the weapon touch him. Instead, he flowed from one form to the next, making sure to keep the ghast's body between him and the enemy archers farther down the stairs. The undead might have been a Professed Warrior, but even it could not ignore the damage the Life oil flames had wrought. More than half of its life was already gone before Richter even swung his first blade at it.

With wild bloodlust, Richter delivered a flurry of blows that the ghast

was able to block, but that was not the purpose of the chaos seed's attack. Each contact was a chance. Each strike he landed was a chance that one of his blade's effects would trigger. He swung Black Ice in a perfectly executed *Drunken Barber*. His powerful Named weapon cut straight through the neck of the ghast and a spout of gravy-colored ichor shot into the air. The demon soul in the weapon hungrily lapped up the life energy and was ready for more!

That was the last melee fighter from level seven, leaving archers and magi firing up at Richter with impunity. Thankfully, he was not alone. A horde of Dungeon beasts poured through the portal. Richter sent all but ten jenit prowlers and the two chupacabras bounding up the stairs. Those remaining rushed down the stairs, the agile animals leaping over the now dying flames. They raced each other to attack the undead firing upon them. The prowlers bounded, eating steps with each pounce. Three went down, two to arrows and a third to a spike of Death magic that began to rot it from the inside out. The rest fell upon the ranged undead, their claws coated with Sun Lotus Poison. The chupacabras fired their quills at the same time. The powerful shots pinged off of a skeletal mage's shield, but each strike drained and gave Richter time to equip his own bow again.

He nocked and fired an arrow down the stairs. In midflight, the arrow blurred and, an instant later, four copies flew alongside the original. A

ghast Warrior had made it up from the sixth level. The Professional was able to block two of the arrows on his kite shield, but the other three impacted. The secondary effect of the *Sonic Damage* enchantment triggered and the undead was disarmed even as the other three arrows struck his body with concussive *booms!* The Warrior tumbled back down the stairs.

As Richter tried to keep the hordes at bay, above a horrible battle of attrition raged. The mauler had long since reached the eighth level and was laying waste to the skeletal monsters. Numerous arrows stuck out of its body, spreading disease, necrotic Death magic and poisons fast enough that even its regenerative ability couldn't keep up. It didn't stop Richter's pet. The Labyrinth boss had extensive resistances to magic, poison and disease and had thousands of health to spare.

Alma watched as the mauler's talons pierced the body of what looked like a revenant. Its claws shot through the undead's body and exploded out of its back before lifting it into the air. The monster screeched defiance at Richter's giant, but that ended when the mauler swung it against the side of the Mausoleum and turned its head into decayed slush. A zombie Rogue jumped onto the mauler's back, performing a Talent attack, *Spine Sever*, but its weapon was too weak to pierce the level ninety-two boss's mana-hardened vertebrae. The attack did remove another two hundred health, however, and the giant screamed in rage and pain.

Before it could respond, a sprite arrow shining blue with imbued magic struck the Rogue broadside. The skeleton flew through the air and Life poison began to spread along the magic pathways that gave its bones false life. Just taking the eighth level had already cost the mauler two thousand health and now the more powerful undead of the ninth level began to attack. Its sacrifice was not in vain. Every arrow and bolt of Death magic that struck it saved the life of a strike team member. They had still taken casualties, but in the first minutes of the attack the eighth level was almost claimed, the sprites and Dungeon beasts matching the undead in ferocity and perhaps outstripping them in hatred. The grisly battle between the living and dead continued.

Through the portal came Caulder, Zarr, Quasea and forty mist workers carrying four blocks of marbled quartz; another ten mist workers came through behind them holding small boulders. As Richter had feared, as soon as the constructs passed through the gateway, mist began to flow out of their bodies. Away from his domain, they were cut off from the magic that kept them intact. He had no idea when they would finally fall apart, but once again he was being reminded that very little time remained.

“Stop there!” Zarr barked, halting the mist workers, and he cast the spell *Contouring Stone* on two of the blocks. The 3rd-tier spell had a twelve second cast time that left him vulnerable, but even as arrows continued to fly

from below, Zarr stayed dedicated to his task. He was able to do so because he had the same strength as every member of the Mist Village: he was not alone.

Caulder stood in front of him with his wardoor pointed down the stairs. Quasea stood nearby, her fierce heart avowing that no harm would come to either her liege or her man. The jenit prowlers had slain the remaining archers of the seventh level and the chupacabras had overcome the shields of the undead magi, riddling their robed bodies with four-foot-long spikes until the unnatural creatures lay still. The prowlers had been ripped apart in the process, but the Life poison on their claws had done its work. They had bought the allied forces time, but only some.

The undead from the sixth floor had arrived on the seventh and the fifth-floor guardians were right behind. More arrows were flying up again; the undead were of a lower level, but there were more of them. The Death mages of those floors began casting as well and the melee fighters rushed upward, screaming and howling to spill living blood.

The flames had died, lasting only thirty seconds, the inhibiting magic of the Mausoleum more than halving the potions' lifespans, if not their damage. Richter and the chupacabras continued firing down the stairs, but for every undead that fell another came behind it, and the creatures had no fear of pain or death. The leading edges of the lich's army had made it to the

first floor.

Quasea began a casting. The noctimancer's spell was one that Richter knew himself, but at a much higher tier. When the chaos seed cast his 1st-tier spell, *Weak Cloying Darkness*, a ten-foot cone of thick blackness shot from his hand. When the shapely gnome enchantress cast her 4th-tier spell, *Enhanced Cloying Darkness*, a literal deluge of night poured down the stairs, decreasing the movement and attack speed of every creature by 60%. It spilled down the steps, blanketing the seventh level and some of the stairs leading down to the sixth. The effect of her spell surprised even the sorceress, as she was seeing the buff effect the Mausoleum had on her Dark magic for the first time.

All the while, Richter shot enchanted arrows at the creatures approaching from above. Quasea's spell had slowed the monsters that were on the stairs, but more continued to flood upward. Seeing the sea of undead, he dropped his bow and rushed forward. The chupacabras continued to fire and Quasea screamed at him to come back, but he ignored it all. More vials of Life oil broke on the steps and the potion coated the grey metal. He managed to smash five against the steps before an arrow broke against the dead center of his chest plate. Richter was knocked to the ground and the back of his helmet struck the steps hard. The helm protected him from a concussion but his bell was still rung for a second as the combat info washed

over him.

BEGIN COMBAT LOG

Skeletal Archer strikes Richter with Necromium Arrow for 0 points of Piercing damage!

Piercing Damage: [(+13 Skeletal Archer's Bow + 7 Necromium Arrow) + 96% for level 48 Archery + 50% for 31 points of Dexterity] – [(27 Armor + 10% Fitted + 25% Matched Set + 15% Piercing + 20% Synergy + 36% Light Armor skill) + (10 Life Defense + 11% Sun Sapphire)] = 0 Damage

END COMBAT LOG

Richter blinked and made his way to his feet, thanking his lucky stars for his new chest piece! Just because his armor didn't let the arrow penetrate didn't mean it negated the physics of the attack. The force of the shattering arrow still transmitted through the breastplate and left him sore, but moments later he was back in the fight.

The chaos seed smashed a few more vials and then ran back up the stairs. Stooping low and turning, his fingers glowed red. His mana dropped by seventy-nine points and a golf ball-sized ball of orange flame shot from

his hand. One foot later it was the size of a grapefruit and three feet later the size of a basketball. It impacted the ground and exploded, sending flames ten meters in every direction. The damage from *Weak Fireball* was only twenty to twenty-five, but it also ignited the pools of oil Richter had left all over the stairs. Any undead caught in those began to *burn!*

That didn't stop the army of undead. They reached the Life flames and ran right through them. Many gained a *Burning* status as they walked through the four-foot-high flames, but they just didn't stop! Richter picked his bow back up with a curse and kept firing.

Multishot arrows with *Sonic Damage* wrought horrible Earth damage and sometimes disarmed or even shattered the armor of the undead, sending shrapnel flying back through their bodies. *Freeze* arrows with *Ignore Defense* penetrated the armor of the dead, turning one into a block of blue ice that fell and shattered. Moments later, the pieces were crushed under the boots of the other undead racing up the stairs. Dual enchanted arrows enspelled with *Death* and *Fire* magic punctured the shields of necromancers that tried to climb the stairs. Richter had never been so perfect. Never more focused on the task of delivering death to the undying. Yet still they didn't stop and Richter felt like he was running out of time. He knew he was running out of arrows.

"Work, damn you!" Zarr cursed. He was having the mist workers

push the blocks of stone down into the grey metal stone steps, but they were contouring to the stair much slower than he had expected. He stood up to push on the tops of stone himself, but an arrow whizzing by his head made him duck back down under cover.

“How much more time, man? These fuckers are still coming!” Richter shouted.

“More!” Zarr spat back. The mist workers continued to push, but enemy arrows found them as well. The defenseless constructs normally had a 50% reduction from physical damage, but they were away from their home and one arrow was enough to finish them. First one disappeared in a puff of grey mist, then another. Then two at once thanks to a blast of Death magic. The others did not notice and continued on with the task at hand.

Richter ducked behind a stone as well and reassessed the battle through Alma’s eyes. Yoshi’s strike team had cleared the eighth floor and had moved on to the ninth. Half of the Dungeon beasts had been slain, but they were still savaging the level twenty-nine to thirty-seven undead defenders. The poison on their claws and tusks meant that even one successful attack would decrease an undead’s HP by the hundreds of points.

The mauler was battling against two undead that were both over nine feet tall. They worked in tandem, clearly intelligent and well trained. Both

looked like disembodied shadow creatures housed in suits of plate armor. The only detail Alma could see was a pair of glowing red eyes. A moment later, he saw they were also Professionals.

Even as Richter watched, one used a Talent that let him double the length of his blade and cut deep into the mauler's thigh. The Labyrinth monster's counterattack was to rake its deadly talons down the knight's body, opening him and his armor like a can opener. A black shadow fled the destroyed armor with a shriek, but the other Warrior didn't waste the opportunity. It swung its battle axe down in a powerful chop and severed one of the three fingers on the mauler's left hand. The boss howled in true pain and swung its other arm, catching the undead in the side and flinging him down the side of the Mausoleum.

Near his own position lower down on the pyramid, Alma could see the monsters pressing through Quasea's spell, getting ever closer to her master.

Should we bond? she asked him, desperation in her voice.

No! he sent back. He'd emptied his quiver and had needed to remove another bundle of enchanted arrows from his Bag of Holding. He shoved them into the quiver, loosed the tie and kept firing. The process took five seconds. It felt like it took a lifetime as he saw the leading edge of the

lich's army had almost reached the second level. Richter thanked whatever god might be listening that there were thirty to forty feet of stairs between each level. Even seeing the undead this close was enough for his heart to hammer in fear.

** I need you on overwatch and support. We only have seven minutes once we bond! Help Yoshi!** He fired a Multiarrow of Freezing at a skeletal archer. The arrow split into four copies, each doing Water damage and injecting poison into it, before ducking back down behind a stone block to dodge return fire. The undead dropped his bow, waves of golden Life energy washing through his body.

Alma sent back her assent, but continued to worry. The fact that her Life magic didn't work here meant she was cut off from almost every casting she knew. The dragonling could only use spell schools of the Powers Richter had unlocked and only the spells he knew in those schools. She could still use the few Air spells he knew, but only *Weak Lightning* was offensive. It, and her psychic attacks, had a several-minute cool down. Still, she followed her master's orders.

Casting *Weak Haste*, Alma swooped down upon Yoshi's position. Circling to the side, she flew in from behind the undead still fighting on the ninth floor and fired a concentrated *Psi Blast*. The Mental magic caught six of the high level undead in its beam. Two collapsed to the ground, twitching,

and the other four were staggered. As she passed the strike team, she also cast *Weak Errant Wind*, increasing the group's ability to dodge projectiles by 30%.

It wasn't enough.

Even as Alma climbed back into the air, she shared the butcher's bill with Richter. Another five sprites were dead and only ten Dungeon beasts remained with the strike team. The mauler had lost over half its health and was moving much slower. Splotches of purple-black magic shot through its body, surging and retreating as its regenerative powers tried to keep up. It was losing.

Kentyiro was down. She wasn't sure if he was alive or dead, but a pool of blood was growing beneath him. Corporal Schroeder's head lay next to his still-twitching body and Ox bled in multiple places even as he swung an axe into the body of a seven-foot-tall zombie. The undead took the hit without flinching and swung its own mace into the guard's face. A wet, meaty *thunk* was the only response as Ox collapsed to the ground. Arrows and bolts of energy continued to fly from above, extracting a terrible toll on the allied forces. Still, his people did not quit.

Yoshi ran up behind the monster that had killed Ox and executed a complicated sword form that he had only mastered after reaching the third

rank of his blade style. The hulking zombie's gigantic arms fell off of its body almost at the same moment. Stupefied, it turned around to look at its attacker. With a disdainful grimace, Yoshi drove his blade through its mouth and into its brain, leaving it as dead as the brave man it had just killed.

The remaining members of the strike squad did the rest. As the last undead fell, not a single member of the allied forces remained unbloodied. The mauler surged up to the tenth level. The boss was eager to hurt the skeletal archers and magi that were wounding it so savagely! Yoshi, Sion and the few others that could still walk, stumble or crawl downed their health potions if they hadn't already been consumed and climbed after it.

We need more men! Richter sent urgently to Hisako. There was only one more level of undead to conquer before the vampire guardians of the roof, but the undead of the tenth level were by far the strongest. Even the mauler was staggering under their firepower as it climbed the stairs. He also had his own problems to deal with. The undead army had almost reached the foot of the Mausoleum, which meant they were only minutes from overwhelming his forces. It was time to roll a hard six!

Richter ordered the mist workers holding the boulders to come close. Zarr had managed to get the first two blocks to meld with the stairs and, thank the banished gods, they were stable. Each time a block was finished, the mist workers that remained were sent up the steps to find any wounded

and carry them back through the portal. Not many were left, and they had lost a great deal of health just being away from the mist village, but they would serve until death.

Zarr looked drained, as if the river of his magic was being forced through a straw, but he didn't quit either. The Mage downed a blue mana potion and cast *Stone Sealant* again, locking the third stone in place. A shimmering green paste appeared under the marbled quartz block, making a bond stronger than moonstone. The third-tier spell would not last forever, but it would last long enough. While it did, the stone wall would not be moved.

He began to start on the fourth, but an arrow finally made it past Caulder's shield. It pierced the dwarf's shoulder and he went down, disease flowing through his veins. More arrows struck the mist workers holding the stone and it fell to down the side of the Mausoleum, leaving a massive hole in their defenses. Richter cursed because they could not risk more people passing through the portal just to bring another stone, but his frustration was nothing compared to Quasea's rage. The noctimancer screamed and cast spells down the steps as fast as she could only to find her magic counteracted by three lower level undead casters that together were strong enough to thwart her.

Richter dropped his bow and rushed over to Zarr, pouring one of his

precious health potions down the dwarf's throat. The geomancer screamed as whatever filth was on the arrowhead continued to course through his veins and arteries, wreaking damage in its wake. Thinking a silent apology, the chaos seed forced the arrow even deeper into the dwarf's shoulder until the tip came out the other side. Then he cut through the shaft and pulled the remnant out through Zarr's back. Blessedly, the geomancer had lost consciousness. Richter prayed he had done enough to save the dwarf's life, because he had no more time waste.

The horde was coming.

Twenty more sprite archers had come through the portal that was now starting to flicker.

I cannot risk sending anymore and my mana will not last much longer! Hisako sent with a mental shout.

Richter sent back his understanding and then reached into his Bag of Holding for a series of vials. Each one had a thick grey fluid at the bottom and a darker grey gas atop it. Opening the first, a stink even fouler than the air of the Mausoleum filled his nose and made his eyes water. He quickly poured the Allure Potion of the Crypt Mistress over the boulder and ordered the mist worker to throw it down the steps.

The gleaming white rock, about the size of a beach ball, bounced

down the stairs, picking up speed. It missed the first two undead it reached on the stairs, but struck the third center mass. The armored skeleton was knocked down and lost hundreds of points of health. Even better, the forward rush of the undead slowed and many turned to follow the stone that was covered in the pheromones of the undead-seducing demoness. Richter cheered when he saw his now impassioned enemies go after the rock and shouted, “Hope you fuckers like blue balls!”

He ordered the mist worker that had been holding the boulder to pick up Zarr’s delirious body and throw him through the portal. Richter hoped the rough handling didn’t hurt the dwarf more, but sending the mist worker through as well would risk further portal instability. The construct did as it was ordered and Richter began to pour another allure potion on the next rock. Fifteen of the sprites began firing down at the undead still climbing the stairs and the other five raced up to help Yoshi’s strike team. The withering fire thinned the ranks of undead climbing the stairs, but they still advanced like a wave of Death. Skeletons, zombies and ghosts surged up the stairs, fell howls and roars coming from their throats.

The battle raged on.

With Zarr safely on the other side of the portal, the sprites were able to focus fire and, using enchanted arrows, destroyed the three skeletal magi that had been opposing Quasea’s Dark magic. Without their interference, she

was finally able to cast her strongest spell again, *Sucking Tar*. The magic moved down the stairs, snaring undead and dragging them to the final death. With an exertion of will, she widened the spell to cover the width of the stairs. When Richter looked at the voluptuous Mage though, he could see the strain on her face and the shaking in her arms as she tried to control the spell.

“How long?” he called to her.

The desperation in her eyes was answer enough. She had bought them time, and her spell stopped any possible advancement of the undead army up the stairs. It would not last long. To make matters worse, Hisako had been right. While some of the undead mindlessly ran into Quasea’s spell, others possessed more than enough intellect to find another way. He watched as the undead rushing up from the sixth floor split once they reached the seventh. A third of the army continued straight up the stairway into the sucking maw of Quasea’s spell, but a third ran left and the remainder went right... towards the other stairways.

You were right! he sent to Hisako. **They’re going to flank us!**

Hurry! was the only response, but this time her message came through weaker, clearly communicating her stress and exhaustion.

Richter told the sprites to hold the beachhead and prepared to race up the stairs to help clear the tenth floor when he heard a deafening roar,

multitudes louder than any other sound on the battlefield. He actually received the debuff *Partially Deafened*, and his head whipped back around to look down at the canyon between the plain and the Mausoleum. All he could whisper was, “No,” as a skeletal hand, fifteen feet in length, reached over the lip of the crevasse and slammed onto the ground of the first floor. A moment later, a skeletal head three times as long as he was tall peered over the side of the edge, mouth open in screaming rage.

Name: Devastator Skeleton

Disposition: Blind Rage

Devastator Skeletons are colossal-sized undead, normally reaching 60-80 feet in height. Comprised of the individual bones of thousands of undead, they have a deep and abiding hatred of the living. These monsters are not only horrifying enemies, but can transport other undead and exude a powerful Fear aura.

Level: 48

Health: 8128

Mana: 183

Stamina: 5927

Strength: 383

Agility: 52

Dexterity: 48

Constitution: 812

Endurance: 592

Intelligence: 18

Wisdom: 15

Charisma: 4

Luck: 19

Special Abilities:

Fear Aura – The sight of this horrible creature makes enemies run in terror

Transport – Can carry other undead size *large* or smaller, which are immune to attack until they detach from the Devastator

“Lord Richter,” one of the sprites called out, distress lacing his voice.

Richter completely understood. He had already resisted the *Fear* effect thanks to his resistances and high stats, but he could feel the effect growing as more of the devastator was revealed. Another sprite called his name, and he responded, “I know. It’s a devastator!” His head whipped up towards Yoshi’s strike party fighting several levels above and his eyes locked on the mauler. The chaos seed’s heart sank as he realized what he had to do. The lich had a devastator...

They needed Omega Supreme.

CHAPTER 100 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



Yoshi, he called out. **I need the mauler back down here!**

What! the sword adept snapped. **Why? We need – CHIKUSHI!**

That expletive was the exact moment that Yoshi saw the devastator. When Richter's Gift of Tongues ability translated the half-sprite's last word, even he was taken aback by the disgusting meaning. He then realized how much restraint Yoshi had been showing by just calling him *gyoti* all that time. The sword adept didn't argue any further. **Understood, we will destroy the rest of this floor, but we will still need to deal with the vampires. They have not attacked yet, I do not know why.**

Richter sent him an assent and called the mauler back to him. The inky blackness of Quasea's spell was fading and twin lines of bright red blood streaked out of her nostrils as she tried to maintain control. Empty mana potion vials lay on the ground near her feet. He tried to make eye contact, but the noctimancer was in a fugue. She had dedicated every ounce

of her will to maintaining her spell. She lacked the energy to do anything else. Caulder still stood nearby, shield held high, protecting the Mage with both his armor and his body. The chaos seed looked at her in gratitude. She was buying them precious seconds. Time that would not matter if his plan did not work.

As his pet came crashing down the stairs, literally falling twice due to the horrible toll the undead had taken on it, Richter ordered a waiting mist worker to carry Quasea through the portal as soon as she fell. He also gave the last vials of Flammable Life Oil to the sprites. Four ran up to the eighth level and split to cover approaches from either side. Richter had to hope that the wall of flames would at least thin the ranks of the undead rushing up the sides of the pyramid. He also prayed the undead weren't strategic enough to climb to the ninth level before flooding down the stairs behind them. Fighting on three fronts was going to be hard enough. Fighting on four would be damn near impossible.

The devastator roared again, and Richter looked back down the steps of the Mausoleum. It had risen out of the canyon, letting him see all of its horrific glory. The damn thing had to be seventy feet tall! Its bones were grey-white and neon-green light shone baleful in its eye sockets. Smaller undead were jumping onto it and being partially absorbed into its bones. Those whose heads remained free still looked up the Mausoleum at Richter.

Those whose arms remained free lifted weapons and shook them in his direction. Each level of the Mausoleum was thirty to forty feet above the one below, but if that giant made it to them, the bulwark they had created would serve no more impediment than a sidewalk curb.

He only had one chance to stop the colossus, and it would probably kill him.

The mauler had arrived and Richter pulled every health potion he had and made the monster kneel down again. To the incredulous stares of the sprites, he opened each vial and poured them into the monster's mouth. It had lost over four thousand health and was been losing more by the second. The health potions Richter gave it would normally restore over two thousand HPs in less than two minutes, but for a *huge* creature like the mauler, they would be lucky to get half of that effect.

It would have to be enough.

"If I don't come back," he told the sprites, "get through the portal and close it. That!" he shouted pointing at the devastator, "Cannot come through to my village. Swear it!"

The lead sprite drew himself to full attention and saluted the allied commander, "By your command, Lord Mist!"

Richter nodded and jumped onto the mauler's back. A greasy strand

of hair served as a handhold like a tenacious root on a cliff face. He cast *Weak Haste* on himself and then ordered the mauler to grab the last few boulders coated in the crypt mistress potion. What came next was perhaps the dumbest thing he'd done since coming to The Land. He ordered the mauler to run *towards* the thousands of undead climbing the pyramid!

Alma shrieked in his mind until he told her his plan. Then she shrieked even louder. Richter shut her out. They had reached the sixth level. The mauler had easily leaped the fading remnants of Quasea's spell and had thrown one of the boulders ahead of it. The white rock had knocked down several undead and two dozen more immediately piled on top of it, desperate to reach the source of the crypt mistress's pheromones. The monster sprinted across the sixth floor to the next stairway, knocking undead out of the way with its prodigious strength. The good news about going downward was that the mean level of the undead was lower than the ones it had already fought above. The bad news was... there were thousands of the fuckers.

Still, by momentum and ferocity, it barreled down the stairs, throwing another three boulders ahead of it. Just as before, these rocks riveted the attention of the undead. That was the good news. The bad news was that the mauler had the stench on it as well now, and the undead it was attracting were being driven into a frenzy. Richter rode the mauler, only feet above the

sea of undead, his hand wrapped around a greasy and disgusting patch of hair.

Despite the mauler's immense strength and high level, the skeletons, ghouls and zombies were slowing it down. Soon, they would drown the beast in pure numbers. The Labyrinth boss screamed in rage and the *colossal* skeleton bellowed back. The devastator had paused, allowing the smaller undead to load themselves onto it, but seeing another enemy giant, it took a massive step forward. Its bony feet crushed undead with every step, but nothing would keep it away from an enemy that had dared to challenge it.

That was exactly what Richter needed. The devastator had to get closer before he did what came next. Looking down, he ignored the little voice inside of him that was screaming, "No!" It wasn't Alma. It was his rational mind telling him to do anything else. *Piss into the wind, shit in his hand, bareback in Hong Kong, any of that would be smarter than this!*

He ignored all of that. He was American. It was time to fuck shit up... and hope it didn't fucking kill him in the process. Richter had never used this spell on the mauler before, because its will was already barely contained by his Blood magic. Now was not the time for half measures though. Ignoring the horde of murderous undead only feet away, Richter used Cloud Running to jump to the mauler's shoulder. Balancing up there while it swung its arms about was like riding a wave, and would have been

impossible without his high stats, but he managed it for the seconds it took to cast his spell. A sense of pure “rightness” filled him as the swirling grey energy surrounded his hands. Five seconds later, he released the energy of Chaos and let it flow directly into the monster he was standing upon.

The mauler began to change... it grew bigger... it grew blacker... and somehow... it got meaner.

*Know This! Your spell Akaton Evolution has evolved your **Tovuut Mauler** into a **Void Chain Mauler**, 1 of 6 possible evolutions. Attack +36. Armor +29. Speed +38. Special Abilities: Chained Dominance.*

Know This! Void creatures have a hatred for any creatures not of their plane of existence that transcends almost any enmity in the Universe. They would destroy the Universe itself if they had the power. What creatures of the void want is nothing less than the destruction of everything in creation and a return to the formless!

*Between your domination of its will and its new nature, your relationship with Void Chain Mauler has devolved from **Blind Hatred** to **Soul Malice**! You have gained your second **Mortal Enemy**! The Void Chain Mauler will stop at nothing to destroy you!*

Know This! The essence of Void creatures is anathema to almost every other type of magic. The hold from your Blood Magic has been destroyed!

The Void Chain Mauler is no longer under your control!

And there it is, Richter thought. I'm fucked.

The mauler raised both arms above its head, screaming its power to The Land. Strange undulations began writhing under its matte black skin. The devastator roared in response, now rushing towards the mauler, only seconds from attacking... but the onetime Labyrinth boss did not care. Instead, it turned its head just enough to see its own shoulder. The mauler fixed Richter with one rage-filled eye that was as big as a shield, crafted of pure midnight. Richter looked back and knew it was not only promising retribution for its enslavement, but it was also daring him to attack first.

To Richter, the question the monster was asking was simple, "Do you want a piece of this, you no-good sonofabitch?"

To Richter, the answer was even more obvious... "Good god, no."

That was why an instant later Richter had jumped off the mauler's back and was skating through the air as fast as his Cloud Running would allow!

The mauler screamed in rage even louder than before, and the entire surface of its skin seemed to bubble. Richter didn't know what was happening, but seeing it through Alma's eyes high above was enough to make him run even faster. The dragonling didn't think it was fast enough.

Swooping down, she flew into range to cast *Weak Static Earth Shield* just as dozens of chains erupted from the mauler's skin and flew in every direction!

Sharp barbs tipped each chain and every undead they touched was pierced straight through. Neither armor, nor bone, nor decaying flesh could stop them. In a single second, the lich lost forty-nine soldiers. They were claimed by the void. They turned matte black just like the mauler, and the green glow of eldritch magic vanished from their eyes. The mauler was no longer just a monster, it was what monsters feared, and it had only two goals in its hate-filled life.

One, to kill and destroy everything in existence.

Two, to make sure Richter died first.

One chain struck the bubble of Earth energy Alma had erected. It easily overcame the defense and the protective shield shattered, but it was enough to slow the attack for a fraction of a second. That moment, and Alma's warning, let Richter dive to the side on a cushion of air and narrowly miss the deadly tentacle of void magic. As he fell to the ground, the only saving grace was the very ferocity of the mauler's attack had stunned some of the undead. He rolled, jumped off the ground and started Cloud Running again.

That still would not have been enough to save him, but then the very

essence of Richter's plan came to fruition. He had laid one foot on top of a kneeling skeleton's head and was pushing off it, all the while thinking, "Get that parkour. Get that parkour!" when the devastator skeleton arrived.

Though the Labyrinthine monster had evolved into a ridiculously more powerful iteration of itself, the behemoth undead was undaunted. Raising both of its thirty-foot-long arms high overhead, it slammed them down on the void mauler with a force that could have toppled castle walls.

The mauler was laid low, and for just a moment forgot about Richter. The chains that had bound it to its dozens of slaves lost cohesion... but this was not the end. The physical chains had only morphed into their void form. A second later, the enslavement of the various undead was complete. With unified screech coming from the forty-nine hellish throats, the ebon forms of the new voidlings attacked the undead that had been comrades only seconds before. The mauler looked up as well, and raising one arm, pointed its talons at the devastator. In a blink, the talons elongated thirty feet and pierced straight through the *gargantuan* skeleton. The undead screamed as the void attack not only damaged its body, but the very magical essence that gave it life after death. It felt pain for the first time in centuries and swung another hammering blow onto the mauler's prone form.

The pheromones of the Allure Potion of the Crypt mistress were still thick on the mauler, making even the smaller undead lust after and attack it

with abandon, but the voidlings defended their new master with otherworldly attacks of massive power. Void magic was something that not even the eldritch magic of the lich could affect. Undead fell by the score. The voidlings were outnumbered hundreds to one, but they could only be destroyed by attacks of the strongest magic. As the mauler and devastator began to trade blows, the strange undulations began to build under the void boss's skin once again.

That should NOT have worked, master! Alma yelled at him as they sped back up the Mausoleum. While many of the undead were now embroiled in the battle between the undead and the void creatures, there were still hundreds surging towards the portal. Black Ice delivered the final death to several undead trying to stop them, but Richter only touched down when needed. Between his high reflexes and Alma's warnings, they were already back to the sixth floor.

Richter continued to fight his way forward and thought back, **You are so right! I can't believe I'm still breathing!** There was a tinge of hysteria in his thoughts.

Initially, the only response on the psychic line was a stunned silence from Alma. How she managed to psychically project silence he had no idea, but then, he'd never understood how a woman did that. She shot a bolt of lightning into the face of a skeletal Rogue that was getting ready to fire an

arrow into him. Richter delivered the coup de grace to the stunned monster and kept running. He was airborne again before the zombie's head even hit the floor.

You aren't going to argue with me? Alma asked him incredulously.

Argue? Richter thought to her as he cast *Mirror Image*. Three copies of himself appeared and he kept running. **Why would I argue? I can't believe I'm alive! My whole plan was to evolve the mauler and then run away. I was pretty sure it would be able to break through my control once it evolved, but I had no idea it would turn into some creature that was an enemy of the Universe itself. There is NO way that should have worked!**

Alma was silent again as she flew next to him, until she said, **You know what, master? It absolutely infuriates me that you are agreeing with me!**

Richter let loose a mad cackle that he was sure he would pay for later, but couldn't help it. He was alive!

They made it back to the bulwark. The sprite archers had created another wall of Life flames, buying themselves a brief respite. The flames licked at the bottom of his boots, but he cleared them and landed on the other side of the incomplete fortification. Even though so much had happened, bare minutes had passed since he began his nearly suicidal plan to ride the

mauler into a sea of undead. He addressed the senior sprite again, “You have to hold this position as long as possible. I hope those two things kill each other, but if one starts making it up here, my previous orders stand. Leave and close the portal.”

“Yes, my lord. Will you be defending with us?”

“No.” Richter sheathed both Black Ice and his elementum short sword before downing his second-to-last stamina potion. The sounds of battle and cries of pain still sounded from above as the strike team tried to secure the tenth level. “I have someone to kill.” Then he took off again, Alma flying close above.

CHAPTER 101 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



Yoshi executed a perfect *Crane's Neck*, thrusting his sword through the mouth of a screaming banshee zombie, puncturing its brain and finally killing it. This happened just as Richter made it to the tenth level. It was the last monster to fall. This would have been wonderful, if the adept wasn't also one of the last three members of the strike team standing. As the chaos seed's feet touched the landing, the adept withdrew his blade and turned towards Richter.

"Foresuto No," were Yoshi's last words before he crumbled to the ground, blood streaming from his eyes, nose and ears like someone had turned on a tap. The only way he had been able to get close enough to end the banshee zombie was for him to suffer its full attack. The adept had paid the price. Richter ran over to the prone form and sighed with relief when he found a pulse. *Analyze* showed that Yoshi's health was very low, though, and it was continuing to fall.

The only other two conscious fighters were Sion and Caulder. The sprite's armor was punctured in two places and both his own red blood and the black sludge of the undead covered him from head to toe. He was leaning against a nearby wall, lungs working overdrive as he tried to catch his breath. As Richter watched, he put the cork of a health potion between his teeth and pulled the stopper free. A second later, the red liquid was splashing down his throat and the sprite let out a sigh of profound relief as his breathing eased.

Caulder stood nearby, missing an ear. The sergeant had rushed up the stairs once Quasea had collapsed and been tossed back through the gateway. His wardoor shield had been lost somewhere along the way, and all the bloodied man held was his enchanted mace. Blood flowed down the side of the sergeant's face, but he downed half of a health potion before walking over and pouring the rest into Yoshi's mouth. The adept didn't wake up, but the color in his face improved slightly.

The sergeant looked at Richter, ichor dripping from the man's mace and the sclera of one eye injected with blood. Whatever had torn off the man's ear had struck the side of his head hard. Richter revised his earlier estimate of how the sergeant looked. The man was on his last legs. He just wouldn't show it. Caulder just drew himself erect and, on wobbly legs, clapped a fist to his heart, "Lord Mist."

Richter didn't know what to say for a moment, overcome with emotion at seeing the stoic loyalty in Caulder's face. Then he looked around at the fallen, and understood. Too much had already been lost. Battle still raged below them, and their target waited above, but in that moment, they were existing in a paradoxical oasis of peace. For those few seconds, they could collect themselves and decide, not just react, on what they must do. That realization was what brought pride and sorrow to Richter's heart because for Caulder, a man that had lost friends and blood in this battle, there was actually no decision. Better to walk through the jaws of death, daring it to bite, then to let these fallen lives mean nothing. He would follow Richter and give everything that he had. He would see the job done.

The chaos seed couldn't think of anything he could do to add honor to such an honorable man except to devote the same level of dedication to the cause. "Report," he ordered quietly and handed Caulder some forest sage to chew. The herb would not do much, but it would help a bit.

"Sir! We have secured the tenth level. Only the stairway to the roof remains and the vampires who guard it. We have taken heavy casualties. Only myself and First Meidon Sion are battle ready. We have used all of our healing and stamina potions. The wounded are being carried back through the portal, but more than half of our fighters are dead. The arrows and blades of the undead were laced with poison or Death magic. The lack of Life

magic has made this a costly battle. Can we expect more reinforcements from the portal?”

“No,” Richter answered shaking his head. He had already asked Hisako. The Hearth Mother had been clear that either the wounded could be brought back through the portal, or reinforcements could be sent, but not both. And if the more troops were sent, it would be a one-way trip. Richter had hoped he was making the right choice, but he couldn’t just send his people or his allies here on a suicide mission. Not when there was a chance he could finish this himself. He had learned the lesson, painfully, that he must rely on others, but in that moment of choice, he had also learned a corollary to that rule of leadership. Sometimes you had to trust in yourself. It was with a will stronger than steel that he *knew* he would not fail.

Looking back at Caulder, he asked, “Why haven’t the vampires attacked?”

“I do not know, my lord. We have only seen the two you mentioned from the ghaſt’s memory. They ſeem content to wait above. One of the ſprites ſhot an arrow up at them, but it broke againſt a ſhield near the top.”

Richter internalized all of this, then looked at them both. “I think I have a way to get by the vamps, but it might not work. The memory I ſtole from the ghaſt’s ſaid that theſe two were *maſter* necromancers. I’m not

going to lie. If it comes to battle, the three of us, attacking two *master* vampire magi that know we're coming... it won't end well. I think it might be time for you two to head home. I can handle this."

Sion and Caulder just looked at him before looking at each other. The sprite held his hand out and with a sigh, the sergeant took a pouch out of his armor and opened it. A moment later, Sion was holding a gold piece with a grim grin. Seeing Richter's confusion, he told him, "We had a bet going that you would say something stupid and noble before the end of the battle. Caulder had more faith in you. I, unfortunately, know just what a gyoti you really are. So how about we finish this fight and then head home... Does that work for you, sunshine?"

Richter looked back at them, then laughed in spite of himself. He immediately felt bad, laughing when he was surrounded by the dead, but it felt good to be reminded of who he was. He was Richter. He was just a man, not a god that had to shoulder all the world's burdens. He just had to do the best that he could, and thankfully, he didn't have to do it alone. Richter had friends and comrades, and come what may, they would do their very best. He nodded thanks to both of them. They nodded back, understanding him without words.

"I'm assuming you have some sort of plan?" Sion asked.

“Yeah,” Richter replied slowly and with obvious reservation. He brightened a bit, “You know, depending on your perspective, thi-”

“Shut the fuck up and tell us the plan,” Sion snapped at him, clearly no longer in the mood for banter. That might have had something to do with the fact that both the devastator and the void mauler’s battle had made its way from the second level of the Mausoleum up to the fourth. There also seemed to be more voidlings than before. Richter decided his friend had a point and outlined his stratagem in a few sentences. Sion stared at him incredulously when he was done talking. The sprite’s only response was, “Next time, don’t tell me,” but he still hitched his bow and turned toward the final stairwell.

The three men walked up the stairs, trusting in the mist workers to get the remaining wounded back to safety. Richter also gave instructions to carry the dead to the portal, but not to push them through. If there was time at the end, they would retrieve their fallen, but not at the expense of the living. When they were halfway up the stairs, Richter took an arrow enchanted with Death magic out of his quiver. Another several steps later, he saw the shattered remains of an arrow and knew they must be at the edge of the spell barrier. The three men stopped.

Both vampires stood, not twenty yards away, looking down at the three of them with contempt on their faces. Richter lifted his arrow and took another step. Still on the string, the enchanted arrowhead came in contact

with the barrier that flared with both the purple-black color of Death magic, but also the neon green of the eldritch. His enchantments would not pierce this last defense. The vampires apparently thought the same.

“Now you will die, blood bag,” one pronounced with relish. “The lich ordered us to leave you alive unless you somehow managed to survive the guardians and attack this final shield.”

“For your arrogance, however, we now get the joy of killing you!” the other finished.

Both vampire magi raised their wands and began to chant.

“Wait!” Richter called out. “Lucasz. Mikaal. I have a gift for you.” Neither vampire stopped the buildup of their magic or cared a bit for what they saw as a last-ditch effort by prey to avoid death. That all changed after he withdrew the severed head of Nien from his Bag of Holding.

Mikaal’s eyes widened in feral delight and his fangs grew longer in his joy. Lucasz had seemed offended that a mere human would speak his name, but then he laughed with pure, savage pleasure when he saw the malformed features of his hated enemy. Both of their wands remained raised, but the light died out from the ends. The sounds of battle continued to rage behind Richter, but he kept his eyes glued on the vampires.

It was Mikaal who spoke, “You did this, human?”

“I did,” Richter replied. He kept the head held high in one hand and the other open and far from his weapons. Sion and Caulder had no such reservations. Both had their weapons in hand, but to the aristocratic vampires, they might as well have been the help. Meant to be used and ignored.

Lucasz had already walked down several steps to get a better look, but Mikaal had remained wary. After Richter answered though, he lowered his wand for the first time and the chaos seed finally got the prompt he’d been praying for.

*Know This! By leaving active combat with the vampire magi Lucasz and Mikaal, the Symbiosis Boon: **Deadly Charisma**, of your Mark of the Adventurer, has activated!*

+2500 Relationship Points with any sentient dead, undead, or living dead.

+10% Relationship Points with any sentient dead, undead, or living dead.

*Your Deadly Charisma Boon and your gift, the severed head of their mortal enemy, have greatly increased your relationship with both **Lucasz** and **Mikaal**.*

Know This! You are considered food by the vampires Lucasz and Mikaal. – 25% to any Relationship changes.

*You have gained **+6,612** (base 8,816 – 25%) Relationship Points for gifting*

them with the severed head of their enemy.

+1,875 Relationship Points (base +2,500 – 25% for Deadly Charisma Boon)

Total Relationship Points: **-1,906** (base 2,118 +10% for Deadly Charisma Boon)

*Congratulations! Your relationship with the vampires Lucasz and Mikaal has improved from **Angry (-10,000)** to **Apathetic (-1,000)**. “Live... die... your fate matters not to me.”*

Richter breathed a silent sigh of relief. It had been a huge gamble for him to choose the crypt mistress Boon of his Mark of the Adventurer. The *Siphon* boon would have greatly increased his stats and made him much more dangerous in battle. When he'd seen the hatred between the vampires and the ghast though, he'd known there was an opportunity here. The *Deadly Charisma* Boon had opened the door to negotiation, now he just had to kick it down before the army or undead caught up with the three of them and literally ripped them to pieces.

Both vampires gazed upon the head for a few moments more, but neither came close to the spell barrier separating them from Richter and his comrades. Mikaal spit on the ground, then looked back at Richter.

“For this gift, I will spare your lives. Leave! You are not strong enough to overcome our shield in the small amount of time that you have left,

not with it bolstered with the magic of the Mausoleum, and we could not allow it even if we desired to do so. The lich's retribution would be fearsome. Take the few men and women you have that still draw breath and depart."

"Run and hide," Lucasz echoed. "The only reason you remain alive is because the lich is busy communing with his master. When that is done, and he has the power he needs, he will rain a powerful vengeance upon you. Enjoy the last days of your life. We will allow you to leave, but if you attempt to breach the shield again, gift or no, we will destroy you."

Sion and Caulder looked at Richter, but the chaos seed's eyes remained on the vampires, "I know that you have no love for your master." Both of the vampires' eyes tightened in disgust as they heard the last word. "Let us pass. I will kill him."

"No," Mikaal intoned. There was no room for another answer in the vampire's tone. "We do hate Singh. The lich has oppressed my people for centuries. He murdered members of our clan that were so old and venerable that they remembered the dawning of the last age. While you have pleased us by delivering the final death to the ghast, you have also made it impossible for us to help you. Centuries ago, our ancestor surrendered our birthright to the lich. Without it, we cannot protect our people." The vampire's lips twisted in anger, "Go!" he ordered dismissively. "I will waste no more time

with you.”

Richter didn't move though; instead, he reached into his bag once more. This time, he pulled out a small clear jewel and held it aloft. It did not glow or exude a magical aura, but it captured the attention of the vampires immediately. They bared their fangs again, but this time in pure animosity and hatred. Emotions that were focused solely on Richter. The chaos seed didn't give them a chance to attack. He put the Heart Crystal back into his Bag of Holding.

“Give it to us, human!” screamed Mikaal. The vampire's face had lost the elegant features of nobility. Now he was showing his true face, a sharp-toothed predator bred to feed.

“I will rip out your eyes and your testicles, then shove your balls into your eye sockets and your eyes up your ass so that you can see your own shit and cum in your own skull!” Lucasz screamed.

Richter had had a whole speech prepared to give to the vampires, but the venom in that threat took him completely off guard. Even Mikaal stopped and looked at his little brother in shock and surprise.

It was quiet for a moment before Richter exclaimed, “Fuck, man. I mean... have you ever actually done that to someone?” Sion cleared his throat loudly. “You know what? Never mind. After all this is done though,

you... you should talk to someone about all that shit,” he pronounced, gesturing to all of Lucasz. “Point is, I didn’t show you the Heart Crystal to mess with you. I did it because I want to make a deal.”

“The deal is give it to us now or die!” Lucasz spat.

Mikaal was more calm, though. He recognized a Bag of Holding when he saw one and knew he couldn’t retrieve the Heart Crystal without Richter’s help, at least not quickly, and not without powerful magic. The older vampire placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder, “What deal do you propose, human? Speak carefully, for we will never be your vassals.”

Scratch idea one, Richter thought, but he didn’t miss a beat, “We have to kill the lich. You hate the lich, and I think Singh will just take the Heart Crystal back if he isn’t dead. Let us through the shield. Help us kill this asshole. And you get the crystal... plus you owe me a favor.”

“And some gold and items,” Sion kicked in.

Richter looked at his friend with a frown, but then thought, what the hell, “Like he said. Some gold and items too. Now what do you say?”

The two vampires looked at each other for long seconds while the roars and howls from below grew even louder, before Mikaal replied, “No.”

“No?” Richter replied incredulously. He knew how much these guys wanted the crystal.

“No,” Mikaal repeated. “We will not fight the lich, and once we have the crystal, we will be able to handle our own defense even if Singh turns his gaze towards us. As far as owing you a favor, never has my clan been beholden to a human.”

“It’s a new age,” Richter told him. “I don’t know if you noticed way down here underground, but apparently the light show when the Age of Chaos came was absolutely fire.”

“Your words make no sense, blood bag!” Lucasz spat.

“You’re just not woke,” Richter replied. “What I am saying is that I don’t have a lot of time,” he pointed at the ever-widening battle below. The mauler was holding on to the devastator, raking it with claws again and again. The *gargantuan* skeleton had hold of one of the void monster’s legs and was in the process of pulling it off. There were over a hundred voidlings now, battling the thousands of other undead. It really wasn’t clear who was winning. The devastator skeleton was four times as big, but while the mauler had always been a terrifying boss, now it looked like a kingdom ender.

“And when I say that I don’t have a lot of time,” Richter continued. “I meant that *we* don’t have a lot of time. If you attack, you might win, but then again, you might not. Either way, I’m an Enchanter and I promise you that you will never get anything out of my bag without my permission.” This

was, of course, at least partially and possibly completely, a lie. He hadn't made the bag, and he was sure there were ways in The Land of bypassing even soul bonds on objects, but somehow, he was pretty sure you wanted to take a firm stance with *master* magician vampires. "Now, you heard my terms. You rejected them. What's your counteroffer? Time is running short."

The two vampires looked at one another and Richter had the feeling that there was some type of nonverbal communication occurring. It only lasted a few seconds. "In exchange for the Heart Crystal we will lower the shield. We will tell you how to defeat the lich yourselves. That is our offer."

Richter only thought for a moment, before responding, "Will one of you be the Master of your restored Place of Power?"

"It will be I," Mikael responded. Lucasz's eyes flashed at his older brother momentarily, but he didn't disagree.

"Then I will agree to your terms, but I also want good relations with you. I want a promise that you will not take arms against me or my people and that we can open diplomatic relations at a later date."

"With blood bags, nev-"

"You should really relax," Caulder interrupted him. "Maybe get some sun."

Not only did Lucasz's fangs lengthen, but his talons extended as well, "You dare to mock me?" he spat. "I can already taste your blood from here!"

Richter took a step forward, putting his body between the younger vampire and his sergeant, "Just relax," he said in a conciliatory tone. "Let me give you a piece of advice. Don't underestimate us. We keep it light with jokes until it's time to get dark. Then, we get pitch black." His last words were bereft of all peace, and the threat was as obvious as a naked blade.

"Hold!" Mikaal commanded, talking to both Richter and his brother. Lucasz flashed his eyes at his brother again, but did as instructed. The older vampire looked at Richter consideringly, "You truly wish to open negotiations with my clan in the future? Even knowing that we view you as food?"

"Like I said, it's a new age. Besides, I've always wanted to fuck a vampire." Lucasz's eyes bulged in anger again at that, but it looked like Mikaal had to stifle a smile. "Now, take it or leave it, but if you agree, I will have a Vow from you."

The brothers exchanged glances again, but Mikaal nodded, "Then I demand the same." When Richter nodded, he said, "We speak in tandem. I, Mikaal, leader of the Silent Dream Clan," he looked at Richter expectantly.

"I, Richter, leader of the Mist Village."

“Do hereby swear to offer safe passage to Richter and his comrades.”

“Do hereby swear to relinquish to Mikaal the Heart Crystal of the Shadow Trench.”

“And further swear to raise no arms against him or his people unless a formal declaration of war be made and your people be duly notified. May my words bind the actions of my people,” Mikaal finished, looking at Richter again.

“What about that secret of how to kill the lich?” Caulder called.

Both vampires glared at the sergeant, but Mikaal continued, “I also swear to give all information that I know about delivering the final death to the lich Singh.”

Richter looked at his friends, but they had nothing else to add. The sounds of battle made him want to look away, but he didn’t dare take his eyes off of the vampire Mage. Mikaal walked forward, and then with a word of Power, banished the magic shield. His wand was still held tightly in his hands though, and he stopped only two steps away from Richter. The pale-skinned vampire looked into Richter’s brown face and the two of them just took one another’s measure before the *master* magi spoke again.

As always happened in such cases, Richter felt as if something greater than himself was speaking through him. The ritual words poured forth from

both of their mouths together, calling upon magic as ancient as the Universe itself. “By these words, we do bind together our wills and intent. Let us hide not from the consequences of breaking this Vow. I do so swear. I do so swear. I do so swear.”

Lucasz, Sion and Caulder all intoned, “Thrice heard and witnessed.

*You have made a **Mutual Vow** with **Mikaal of the Silent Dream Clan**.*

Failure by either party to uphold their side of the agreement will cause a decrease in your reputation with all beings and other unknown consequences, and will free the other member of this Vow from any obligations. Keep in mind, your word means everything.

Richter hadn’t really been super happy about the whole being duly notified of a declaration of war thing, but he couldn’t really argue against it either. Every second he would have spent dithering was one less second they had to return. He never forgot that the portal had a hidden countdown. The main point was that the shield was down, and they could finally complete their mission. There was just one more thing he was owed first. Richer took the Heart Crystal out of his bag, and said, “Spill.”

They looked confused for a moment, but the context wasn’t too hard to figure out, “The lich knows our power which is why he trusts us to guard this top floor. He also knows that we hate him, however, and so has never

shared many secrets with us. What we do know is that the secret of his power is tied to his staff and the statue. The giant sculpture is a conduit to an Exile that Singh worships named Rakshasha. As destroying the statue is beyond you, I suggest you focus on destroying the staff, though I do not know how you will manage that either. If you do succeed, he will be cut off from the source of his greatest power and you will have a chance, albeit a small one. Even without the staff, he is a powerful lich lord.”

“That’s it?” Sion asked aggressively.

“Yes, sprite!” Lucasz spat. “Keep your tongue between your teeth. My brother’s agreement does not absolutely protect you from me.”

“Yes, it does,” Richter told him with deadly intensity. Lucasz looked at him with clear malevolence. Months ago, he might have risen to that challenge, but he had grown as a man and as a ruler. He did not have time to indulge this, but he would not forget in the future. “Is there anything else you can tell us?” he asked Mikaal.

The older vamp had flashed an angry glance at his impetuous brother and then turned the same expression on Richter. Whether that was because they had not received the Heart Crystal yet or because of Lucasz’s behavior wasn’t clear, but when he spoke to the chaos seed, there was at least a modicum of respect in his voice. “No, I do not.”

Richter looked at him a moment, then tossed the Heart Crystal to Mikaal. The vampire's eyes flashed, but he caught it effortlessly, "Then I consider our bargain fulfilled."

*You have relinquished control of the **Heart Crystal** of the **Shadow Trench**.*

*The **Mutual Vow** has been fulfilled by both parties.*

Mikaal looked at the clear jewel in his hand as if he could not believe it was there. "A human that keeps his word. Perhaps this new age truly will mean something new for all of us." He thought a moment then reached into his robes and handed Richter a blood red coin.

You have found: Blood Gold of the Silent Dream Vampire Clan	Durability: 12/12 Item Class: Uncommon Weight: 0.02 kg Traits: Can be used as currency and is the equivalent of ten gold crowns. Also serves as a marker to indicate the favor of the ruler of the Silent Dream Clan.
--	--

"Perhaps we will meet again one day," Mikaal stated, "but if any of your people are caught in our domain without this coin, they will be considered prey. I hold this to be within the bounds of nature and our agreement."

"Fair enough," Richter said. "I do not have a similar token for you

though.”

Mikaal smiled, and it was as cold and ruthless as the pointed fangs it revealed. “If we come to see you, it will be in the dead of night, and you will never know until we are already there.”

With that pronouncement, Mikaal spoke in a hissing yet eloquent-sounding language to Lucasz. Both vampires spun, and by the time they had finished their turn, they had both transformed into giant bats. Each had a wingspan of seven feet, tip to tip. They flapped away, leaving nothing behind.

“You have to admit,” Richter stated begrudgingly, looking after the disappearing vampire bats, “that was a baller exit.”

CHAPTER 102 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



The conversation with the vampires had another unexpected benefit.

*Your Gift of Tongues Ability has identified a new Language: **Tongue of the Fallen.***

Richter dismissed the prompt. It might come in handy in the future, but now was the time for battle. He slowly extended an arrow and confirmed the shield was indeed gone. With silent nods and bound in purpose, the three men climbed the final staircase. They held their heads high despite the fact that they were each bleeding, bruised and pale.

As they climbed, the three men kept scanning for more defenders, but they didn't see another soul, living or dead. Caulder led the trio, his mace held at the ready. When they reached the top, Richter looked around. The roof looked exactly as it had in Nien's memory.

The floor was made of the same grey metal blocks as the rest of the Mausoleum. About thirty yards away was the large stone sarcophagus with

the lid closed. Eldritch light leaked from the edges around the top. The only wall was directly in front of them, the other sides were open to the air. It only took one wall; one was enough to seriously freak all of them out.

Sion and Caulder were especially discomforted as they hadn't seen the horrifying faces that seemed frozen in agony before. Even for Richter, who had witnessed it in Nien's memory, it was so much worse seeing it in real life. The mouth and eyes of each face were holes that crossed the breadth of the wall and let the dancing green light shine through. The light just made it seem like the faces were actually alive and being eternally tortured.

Richter spoke quietly to both of his comrades, "Stay focused. The lich was in the coffin when I was viewing the memory. That's what we check first. If he's inside when we push the lid back, then we stab him to death and get the hell out of here. Now how does that sound?"

"Let's do this," Sion responded, holding his elementum short sword.

"Sounds like a perfect plan to me, milord," Caulder said with a low voice. "If he is not in there?"

"Then we go to Plan B," Richter told him grimly.

"Banished gods, please let the lich be in the coffin," Sion prayed, really hating Plan B.

Richter nodded in agreement and they slowly stalked forward. Their heads were on a swivel, but still no enemies appeared. The chaos seed reached out a hand to push the lid aside, but Caulder stopped him. Shaking his head, the sergeant set his mace down. Then, he started to push.

The lid moved remarkably easily. So smoothly, in fact, that it flew off to the side and landed with a resounding crash! Richer cursed as he leaped forward with Black Ice raised. Sion leaned forward with an enchanted arrow nocked, and Caulder scrambled to pick up his mace again...

It was empty.

Sion fixed the sergeant with a glare and Caulder glared right back. “It wasn’t my fau-” the man began before looking puzzled. He met Richter’s eyes for a solitary moment before his eyes erupted in green flame. Caulder was not even given the time to scream before his skeleton ripped itself free of his body. Bits of flesh and blood flew everywhere, including all over Richter’s face. Sion issued a startled curse, both of them looking in horror at the monster that had just emerged from their friend’s body.

Name: Mausoleum Guardian

Disposition: Hatred

This skeleton is formed from a savaged corpse cursed by eldritch magic. The skeleton grows stronger the longer it is exposed to eldritch energy and will remain on this plane indefinitely, using the soul of the slain as an anchor. It traps its victim’s soul, tormenting it until this creature is destroyed. This undead retains all the skills, abilities, qualities and expertise that its victim had in life. If destroyed, it will continue to feed off

the eldritch energy in this building until it is resurrected.

Special Attack: **Eldritch Growth** – Creature gains levels and power the longer it is exposed to eldritch magic.

Level: 19

Health: 380 **Mana:** 210 **Stamina:** 290

Strength: 32

Agility: 27

Dexterity: 27

Constitution: 38

Endurance: 29

Intelligence: 21

Wisdom: 20

Charisma: 8

Luck: 15

The eldritch glow inside of the coffin flared and a tether of the same neon green energy appeared between the skeleton and the sarcophagus.

Analyze showed Richter that the skeleton gained a level in just that first instant of contact, and it grew two inches in height.

This is Caulder. This is Caulder. This is Caulder! The thought just kept running through Richter's head. He was so distracted that he didn't even hear the loud *clicks* that reverberated through the floor. His mind was completely consumed with disgust and sorrow as he looked at Caulder's remains. More flesh was either falling or being burnt away by the eldritch flames surrounding the undead. The guts fell out of the front of the chainmail the skeleton was wearing, wet loops making a meaty *slap* sound as they hit

the grey metal floor. It looked at Richter and reached toward him with a burning hand. That threat snapped something in Richter and he turned cold. Normally, in battle, his emotions ran hot and a primitive side of him took control. This time, all he felt was dispassionate fury. This thing had killed his friend. This thing still had his friend's soul. This thing had to *die*!

Sion shot it with a *Freeze* arrow which dulled the green flames in its chest somewhat. It knocked the monster back one step and that was all the opening Richter needed to attack. With quiet fury, he swung Black Ice at the same spot. There was no finesse in his attack, just pure hatred. His first swing knocked the creature down to its knees. The second opened a rent in the chain mail. The third fractured its rib cage. The tether of eldritch light continued to heal and increase its power, but not even the Mausoleum could match the damage Richter's Named Weapon was inflicting with his powerful swings.

He attacked the skeleton until pieces were missing from its skull, its arms had been hacked off, its leg bones had been shattered and the remains of Caulder's organs were splattered across his armor. The skeeling scales were no longer white. Sion could not stop him. With each swing, names streamed through his head. Ox, Schroeder, Kentyiro, Yoshi, Zarr, Caulder, Petal... Each name was a recrimination both to himself and the Universe for letting his friends and comrades die. Each name made him sink further into a cold

rage as he bludgeoned the skeleton that had once been a man he'd respected. Both his rage and sword blows turned on the sarcophagus as well, but the stone was unyielding. Even his most powerful swings could barely scratch the large coffin. In the end, Alma was only able to reach him when she blocked his sight of the felled monster with her own body.

You have done it, she said softly in his mind. **You have one more battle to fight, my love. Come back to us.**

Richter swung his blade a final time, and a sob ripped its way out of his throat. He looked at his familiar. Alma was right. There was one more creature he had to kill and it was high past time that the lich died the final death. He turned and glanced at Sion, for the first time seeing the fearful gaze his best friend adopted when Richter lost control. A heaviness fell onto his heart at seeing his best friend's expression, but he didn't say a word. He would talk to Sion about it at a later time. Right now, there was blade work to be done.

Richter looked down at the body of the Mausoleum guardian.

"It's not dead," Sion commented. The tether of eldritch light still connected it to the coffin. Richter had hacked it to bits, but the cracks in the bone were already healing.

"Not yet, but it will be. We finish the job. We go to Plan B. If we

survive, we can mourn for our friend later.”

Sion nodded. They were both about to walk towards the wall of faces when a roar made Richter look back towards the stairs. That roar saved their lives. The two behemoth monsters hadn’t made it to the top of the Mausoleum yet. In fact, Richter couldn’t even see them as they were hidden from view by the floor, but he did see a flash of red. The chaos seed grabbed Sion’s shoulder roughly, keeping him from taking a single step away from the stone sarcophagus. The sprite looked at him sharply, but Richter maintained his grip on his friend and continued to stare at the floor. As he watched, more red glows appeared. First five, then twelve, then more than fifty and Richter stopped trying to count.

He looked at Sion and said, “Traps.”

Richter kept watching and almost the entire floor behind them turned crimson. The farthest traps appeared first and then more hidden triggers turned red like a slow-moving algae bloom. At first, he thought he was seeing traps arm themselves in succession, but then he understood what he was really seeing. The traps closest to the stairs were the lowest level. The ones getting closer to the back wall were better concealed and his Pierce the Veil skill was having to struggle to see them. Which meant... there still might be traps he just couldn’t detect in other areas that weren’t glowing red yet.

Richter looked past the sarcophagus towards the wall of faces. After a few seconds, a few more red glows appeared, but it was nothing like the sea of scarlet closer to the stairs. He knew in his gut that didn't mean the floor between the coffin and the wall of screaming faces was safe. In fact, it meant just the opposite. There were traps. They were just too high level for him to see.

He looked bleakly at Sion, "I've got some bad news."

"Any good news?" the sprite asked with gallows humor.

Richter looked at the hundred yards of real estate between them and the door, through the wall of faces. A football field of grey metal that had been seeded like a deadly and invisible minefield, "No... and he's twitching."

Sion looked down at the monster created from Caulder's remains and saw that some of the bones were indeed connecting back together. A couple swings of his elementum short sword fixed that problem, at least momentarily. "It's not going to stop growing stronger," the sprite said with a mix of resignation and sadness. They were both trying not to think too much about the fact that one of their friends had just died in one of the worst ways imaginable.

"I know," Richter answered quietly, "which is why you need to head back through the portal." He held up a hand before Sion could even respond.

“Look, man. We both knew this might be a one-way trip even if everything had worked out well. It didn’t. We had to fight our way through floors of these fuckers and a lot of people died. And now Caulder-” He stopped talking for a moment, the words catching in his throat. “Caulder has already paid the price, and we haven’t even seen the lich yet. Now we’re stuck here in a sea of traps that I can’t even detect. Even if I could, I wouldn’t have the time to disarm them all before one of those giants fighting it out only a few floors below us wins.”

He laid his hand on Sion’s shoulder, “I can’t change any of that. What I can do is coast right over these traps with my Cloud Running skill and hope they don’t have a proximity trigger. It’s only thirty yards back to the stairs. I’d be willing to bet that there aren’t any traps once we clear the roof. I’ll carry you there. You make it back through the portal. I’ll finish the lich. Once I’m done, I’ll see you back in the village.”

“You think you can kill a centuries old *master* of magic that knows you’re coming? I thought you’d finally learned your lesson trying to do everything yourself! You think I’m not hurting too? Caulder wasn’t the only friend I lost today, Richter!”

“We do not have time for this!” the chaos seed shouted. The sounds of battle below them were growing louder, which meant the fight between the two giants was growing closer. “Wake up! I’m not making it back through

the portal, man. And if you come with me, you're probably not making it back either! I know that I can Cloud Run you the thirty yards to get to the stairs before my stamina runs out. I do *not* know that I can get us the more than hundred yards to the wall. I don't even know if the ground will be safe if we do make it to the wall. Even if we do make it that far, and even if we do kill the lich, I can't leave this Mausoleum intact. I can't let Caulder's soul be trapped here forever!"

"Plan B?" Sion asked in irritation and anger. "And you intend to die when it happens?"

"If that's what it takes," Richter shouted.

"You're out of your fucking mind," the sprite said softly. "How do you even know if that will work?"

"I don't. That's why I'm throwing everything I have at this. All of it, including what I gave you earlier."

Sion was quiet for a moment, "How do you know that you'll come back this time if you die? You told me what Heman said. You've already died twice. This might be your last life."

Richter forced a false smile, "Hey, don't worry, I'm a lucky guy." The smile slipped away, "Besides. It's been a wild ride, man. I've got no complaints, but what I do have is more than a thousand people counting on

me. That includes all of your people too. I have to do this.”

The sprite looked at him quietly again, but then he nodded. Richter sighed in relief that his friend was actually listening to him. He could save at least one person he loved. The miniscule joy faded when Sion spoke, “Everything you’re saying is right. I know that we will most likely not return, but I am a Child of the Forest. I know you’re trying to save me, but you’ll need my help to save everyone else. Now, you’re wasting time. Let’s go.”

Richter looked at his friend and his heart tightened. He would not show the disrespect of ignoring his friend’s choice though. “Together then.” The two men clasped wrists, and then he looked at Alma. The dragonling flew down to him and he caught her in his arms. The extra armor was lightweight, but he took care to avoid her new claws. She looked up at him and licked his face.

It all relies on you, my love. Be safe, he told her. **You’ll need all the speed you can get. I need you to fly like the wind. That’s why these are for you.**

He brought out both Psi Crystals he’d gained from the chupacabras and had her inhale the Mental energy. She siphoned the blue-white glow from each and he quickly accessed her status page. This time, there was no

doubt or hesitation in his choice.

*You have purchased: **Flight Speed II**. Alma's base speed is now increased by +20%.*

Total Psi Points Remaining: 64

*You have purchased: **Flight Speed III**. Alma's base speed is now increased by +30%.*

Total Psi Points Remaining: 24

The last points he left for her to use if needed. If they survived the next hour, then they could invest them into whatever Enhancement she wanted. In the meantime, her body glowed with the energy of Thought magic. Her wings lengthened, but also thinned. The actual structural composition of her bones changed, becoming harder and lighter at the same time. Her face thinned and the snapping movement of her tail became more pronounced. Alma had become a deadlier version of herself.

I will not fail you, master! Her tone was hungry and eager as she leapt from his embrace with two items clasped in her claws. She flew almost straight up, gaining altitude until she flew through an opening high on the wall. In the process, Richter finally saw what was beyond the wall. It had been obvious that each level of the Mausoleum was smaller than one below it, but he hadn't known that the back of the Core building was flat. He'd

been mistakenly thinking of it like a pyramid when really it looked more like a ramp.

What lay beyond the wall of faces was a walkway of grey metal only twenty yards across. It extended nearly a hundred yards past the wall. To either side was only open air and a sheer drop into the abyss. At the end of the walkway, he could see the lich. Both of the magi's hands were upraised and tethers of green eldritch flame connected his fingers to the swirling ball of energy in front of the statue of the Exile. Richter quickly told his friend what he'd seen.

"Two imbued arrows? Blow his ass off the walkway?" the sprite asked.

"Shake and Bake, el diablo." Then Richter cast *Weak Haste*, bent down so Sion could jump on his back and they were off!

The chaos seed ran as quickly as he could, every step letting him glide for three seconds. When his coasting time elapsed, he pushed off the air itself, his stamina dropping much further now that he was carrying another two hundred pounds of sprite. Richter just ran faster, knowing he might only have four or five jumps before his feet touched the ground and ensured an almost certain death.

Richter's heart thudded the entire time, but they made it to the wall.

He steeled himself for when his feet finally touched down in the doorway, praying there wasn't a trap. Though they landed heavily - he had run out of stamina on the last jump - they managed to land in one piece.

The chaos seed lay panting on the ground, wishing he'd invested more points into Endurance.

"Get up!" Sion whispered to him tersely. The sprite had one eye on the lich, but the magus hadn't turned around. Singh seemed completely focused on the ritual he was performing.

Richter glared at his friend and whispered back, "You have no idea how hard what I just did was! Do you have a stamina potion or what?"

The sprite glared back, but tossed Richter a vial filled with green liquid. "That's the last one. I don't have any more health or mana either."

The chaos seed downed the potion and felt strength return to his limbs. A moment before, he had felt like he'd sprinted a marathon. Now he just felt like he'd boxed a heavyweight, and lost. Sion helped him to his feet and both men unhitched their bows. Arrows nocked, they began to imbue. Gold light sprung into existence around Richter's exactly three seconds after a blue aura surrounded Sion's. They both poured almost their entire mana pool into the blows, relying on this opening salvo to overcome and destroy the distracted lich. Seconds later, they released.

Twin bolts of energy trailed through the air, converging on the undead lord. They homed in, their aim perfect. The shots promised sure death to their enemy... a promise that was never delivered.

Twenty feet from the eldritch caster, the imbued arrows struck a spell barrier. A moment later, they both learned the folly of attacking a prepared Mage. Not only did the shield stop their shots, but the power of their imbued arrows was reflected back. It had taken less than a second for the arrows to fly down the fifty-yard walkway. The energy was trapped by the shield for another scant moment, which was just enough time for the two friends to make eye contact. Richter's gaze was startled and angry, but Sion's only held a sorrowful apology.

Then the force of their magic shot back into them and they were both flung through the air. The magical riposte slammed them back into the wall of faces and Richter's helmet was the only thing that saved him from a skull fracture. It didn't save him from a concussion. As he slid to the ground, his vision was blurry and he couldn't remember what had happened only a second before. Sion wasn't so lucky. His enhanced sprite armor saved him from a great deal of damage, but the damage he put into his shots was much greater than Richter's. Sion just lay on the ground, smoke curling from his body and blood pooling on the ground beneath him.

Richter's wits began to return to him a few seconds later when he

heard unhurried footsteps. Raising his head, his eyes swept over Sion's prone form and he wanted to weep. He kept turning his head though and saw the lich walking towards them. The creature's head was wizened and dry like old parchment, just as Richter had seen it before. Thoughts began to form in his addled mind. It was coming to finish them off. It was coming to kill Sion!

The chaos seed could taste blood in his mouth, but he still managed to bare his teeth, "You think you've won, but you haven't. Some friends want to say hi!" Then he grasped the glowing coin he had kept in his belt pouch for quite a while. The coin that had been handed to him by a ghost girl what felt like forever ago.

Krista, he thought, please help us.

The spirit was true to her word. The coin grew blazing hot until Richter had to drop it. It fell to the ground, bouncing twice before it lay still. The lich stopped walking, staring at the small glowing disc. A moment later, dozens of spirits flew free of the item, howling as they saw the lich standing only two dozen yards away. The ghost of a small girl wearing a simple white shift looked Richter in the eye. Krista's expression was anything but childlike. The malevolent rage he saw there was truly frightening to behold. Her voice was ethereal and howling, "We hold your oath fulfilled. Now witness the final death of this monster!"

With that pronouncement, more than fifty spirits of pure white light screamed towards the lich. Their fingers grew long and pointed and their shrieks of anger and rage even drowned out the sounds of battle happening on the lower floors of the Mausoleum. The lich stood, unmoving, until the spirits were within ten feet of him. Then, the large green jewel in his staff flashed and the angry wails of the phantoms morphed into shrieks of fear.

The leading ghost was sucked into the gem, followed by another and another. A vortex of neon green light began pulling all of Krista's army into the jewel. Not one of the spirits was able to reach the lich to enact their vengeance. Richter's last sight of the glowing white spirits was Krista herself looking at him and clawing the air in a vain attempt to escape. Her face was pure, beseeching panic. Her mouth opened to say something, but then she was gone, exiled to whatever new hell the lich damned the spirits to suffer.

Singh started walking towards him again, and Richter heard a dry, rasping sound. It took a second for his addled mind to realize that the lich was laughing at him. With a wave of the magi's hand, green flame washed over the caster's body. It flashed out of existence soon after, leaving behind what appeared to be a living body, the body the lich had had before his 'ascendancy.' It was with a measured and educated voice that Singh asked, "Is that the extent of your power?"

Richter stared into the face of his enemy and shouted, "No!" with

blood spilling over his lips and all the while thinking ‘shit!’ because it was. At least, it had been the least insane plan that he had to kill the bastard. What he had to do next... it wasn’t what would be thought of as classically smart. Those plans would have to wait until he could fight back the pain and debilitating nausea enough to move though. In the meantime, he examined the transformed body of the undead that had threatened the lives of every creature in the forest.

The lich’s dried skin was gone. Now, he looked like a strong man in his forties. His skin was bronze and his hair was a thick black mane that was pulled tight into a braid that hung past his shoulders. The lips were thin and severe, and he regarded the chaos seed with a harsh and dispassionate glare. The lich was only four feet tall and the chaos seed couldn’t help but notice that Singh looked remarkably like a sprite. It was the cruel look in his eyes that really grabbed Richter’s attention though. The stare deepened and a combat warning flashed into his vision.

You are under psychic assault! The lich Singh is attempting to force a psychic connection.

Richter felt a panic he’d never known before. Pain was one thing. He had already endured plenty of that. Death wasn’t even something he completely feared anymore. He’d been killed twice before. He might be reborn if it happened again. The lich had already almost broken into his mind

before though. Richter knew that even with his defenses, he was no match for the ancient magi in a Thought battle. While death of the body was horrible, he couldn't imagine a worse fate than the lich burning his mind away. Richter shut his eyes tight and looked to the side.

All he heard was the not so distant clash of battle for several seconds. Then Singh spoke, "Hmmm. I never forget the taste of a mind. You wish to keep me outside of yours, but I still recognize you from that barest glimpse. You are the man who spied upon my orders to Nien. I believe you are also the one who witnessed the ascension of my death knight Jorgen."

The lich paused before continuing, "I did not know the significance so many years before, but I understand Thought magic so much better now that I have unlocked the eldritch form of it." A smooth hand slid along Richter's cheek in almost a caress. "I am so happy that you accepted my invitation."

Invitation? He had no idea what Singh was talking about so he just kept his eyes screwed shut. Then he heard the sound of footsteps walking away to the right. Then he heard a grunt of pain, "This man I do not know, and yet..." Richter heard another grunt of pain, and couldn't bear to keep his eyes shut any longer. Singh was holding Sion by the throat. The lich's staff, with its giant emerald head stood upright on its own nearby. Belying the undead's small size, the sprite's feet were dangling off of the ground. There wasn't even a tremor in Singh's arm as Sion struggled feebly to free

himself. Red blood continued to flow from beneath his armor and was landing with a *pat pat* on the cold metal floor.

The lich reached out a finger and dipped it into Sion's blood. Slowly and deliberately, he placed that finger in his mouth. Singh's eyes closed in pleasure, like a man tasting a fine wine, then his eyes opened in surprise. He spoke in a language that Richter had not heard before, "Blood of my blood."
*Your Gift of Tongues Ability has identified a new Language: **Archaic Sprite***

"Let him go," Richter shouted weakly. "I'm warning you." He tried to stand, but collapsed back to the ground in a wave of vertigo. The chaos seed vomited onto the rooftop, splashing his hands, but he still heard Singh's response.

"You are in a position to warn me of nothing, sir. I, on the other hand, am in a position to do... anything." Richter picked his head up, filth lining his mouth, and looked at Sion. His friend met his eyes, face turning purple and struggling to get free. Singh said nothing else before he flung his arm out to the side, throwing Sion with unnatural strength. The sprite slid along the grey metal of the roof, scrambling for a handhold. His body moved beyond the edge and fell into the abyss.

"No! God, no!" Richter screamed. Strength flooded his pain-wracked body and he surged to his feet. In a move that was smooth and

practiced, he drew his elementum short sword and threw it forward as hard as he could. The enchanted green blade flew true. Singh barely had time to react before the blade pierced his body and two feet of forged metal pierced his chest.

Richter felt a surge of triumph and vindication... before the lich calmly looked down at the weapon. With deliberate care, Singh grabbed the hilt, wrapping one finger around it at a time. Once he had a firm grip, he coolly slid the weapon out of his body. The plate-sized emerald in his staff flashed as the weapon was removed, but not one drop of blood or ichor fell. The wound healed as soon as the blade was free.

Singh did not look at all bothered by the attack and Richter fell to his knees. His body was racked with pain and the internal bleeding he'd suffered from the rebound of his imbued arrow was worsening. That was nothing compared to the pain in his heart though. With his head hanging low, he heard the lich's steady and unhurried footsteps again. The image of Sion's body going over the edge replayed in his mind, but he still couldn't ignore the lich's disapproving tone.

"Elementum. Truly remarkable. You have found one of the most magically active metals in existence." There was nothing but scorn in Singh's next words, "And you turned it into a sharp stick."

There was a clatter of metal on metal as the lich tossed the blade to ground, discarding it like trash. Richter's body and soul were drowning in pain, but he would not just kneel before this thing! His mana pool was still almost completely empty, but he was not out of tricks. Raising one arm, he sighted on the lich's body, being careful to avoid eye contact. With a snarl, he released the spell saved in his Ring of Spell Storage.

Invisible rings of sonic force shot forth. They washed over Singh and the lich bowed slightly like he was walking into a heavy wind. That was all the chaos seed's surprise attack accomplished. Singh merely reached a hand out and his staff slid into his hand. The emerald flashed again and a bubble of neon green light sprang into existence. The lich stood unconcerned once again. Ripples played across the surface showing the sonic waves that were issuing from Richter's ring, but besides making the lich hesitate for the first second, there was no other effect.

In despair, Richter used *Analyze*, praying that it would show some clue of how to defeat the man.

Name: Singh	Race: Lich Sprite	Level: ???
	Disposition: ???	
STATS		
Health: ???	Mana: ???	Stamina: ???
ATTRIBUTES		

Strength: ???	Agility: ???	Dexterity: ???
Constitution: ???	Endurance: ???	Intelligence: ???
Wisdom: ???	Charisma: ???	Luck: ???
SKILLS		
???		
DESCRIPTION		
This lich was once a sprite		

The status screen was the same neon green as the lich's eldritch magic. Richter couldn't care less about the aesthetics of the window. There was nothing here that could help him. He couldn't even tell if his attack had removed a single point of health. Worse, the window showed even less information than the mauler had, and the Labyrinth beast was level ninety-two! The only thing of interest was the description, saying Singh had once been a sprite. That, coupled with the 'blood of my blood' comment, was interesting, but didn't help him now. Richter's gaze switched to the lich's weapon in desperation. The vampires had advised destroying the staff, but for the first time, even Richter's Identification Talent was stymied.

You have found: Staff of Kungor	Attack: ??? Durability: ??? Item Class: Artifact Weapon Type: Staff, One-handed
---	--

Quality: ???

Weight: ???

Traits:

A powerful *artifact* created with otherworldly knowledge.

???

???

???

???

Requirements: Can only be used by a disciple of the Exile Rakshasha

Charges: ???

All he knew was that the thing connected Singh to the Exile somehow. The ‘otherworldly knowledge’ basically implied the same thing. The only other information was that the staff was an *artifact*. Unfortunately, his inspection hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“You are quite vexing,” the lich admonished in a his now-cultured voice. He grabbed Richter by the neck in the same way he had choked Sion. The chaos seed was pulled to his feet, but the lich was not tall enough to lift him off the ground. That didn’t keep Richter from choking as Singh tightened his grip with the strength of the undead. The lich examined the chaos seed’s armor and seemed amused by the Life enchantments. After that, Singh unhurriedly removed Richter’s weapons from their sheaths, tossing them to the ground. The undead’s eyes lingered on Black Ice for a moment,

but he cast even the Named weapon to the side without much interest. He did this with an arrogant detachment and spoke the entire time.

“When I lived above ground, it was seen as extremely poor manners to use magic on another without permission. I suppose not much could ever be expected of a human, however. It sickens me to see one of my descendants fighting alongside one such as you.” His next words were almost sad, and were accompanied by a regretful shake of his head, “How far they have fallen without my guidance.”

The lich continued disarming Richter as he spoke. “Despite your lack of good manners, I can understand the desire to know more. A thirst for knowledge is something that you and I share. I imagine your feeble skill did not show you much. Let me show you how it is done. Nothing can hide from the Eye of Kungor.”

Richter had screwed his eyes shut again, not wanting to risk a psychic link, but he could still see neon-green light seeping through his eyelids as Singh brought the jeweled staff closer to his face. The light penetrated and violated him. Not his mind, but his very soul. His spirit recoiled from the foul invasion. It only lasted moments, but to Richter, he felt as if he had been forced to swim through a river of filth for days.

“Ah,” the lich exclaimed. “You are indeed the Master of the Mists.

A young Master to be sure, but a Master nonetheless. Your progenitors offered me all manner of trouble in the past centuries. Time, it seems, will haunt even an immortal. Yet,” Singh spoke speculatively, “your Mastery is not the most important thing to know about you. You are not of this world. Your mind and soul were taken from your home and placed in The Land. You are a,” the undead paused again as if tasting the words, “chaos seed... and you have a form of immortality yourself. Not true immortality, but you can be reborn.”

Singh continued, like he was reading a list, “You have done much in the five months you have been here. More than should be possible for a lowly human. I wonder.... Yes! You do have truly interesting abilities, young Master. Limitless. I will rip that free of your soul before the end. I thank you now for such a wonderful gift. Do you know how special your ability is? Why a pathetic human would be gifted with a *legendary* ability I have no idea, but we have all of eternity for me to learn all your secrets. Let us begin with your true name.”

The light seeping through Richter’s shut eyes intensified. He felt the parasitic magic flood his soul again before retreating. “Hmmm. Your true name has never been spoken in The Land. How interesting. No matter, I will rip that knowledge from your mind. You will give me everything, including your Heart Crystal, and before I destroy your will completely you will

witness the desecration of all you hold dear.”

Richter had quailed even as he choked at hearing just how much the lich was able to know about him. His most intimate secrets were being laid bare. Everything except for his true name. He sent a silent thanks to Xuetrix, wherever the imp might be, for his advice when he first arrived in The Land, but then the undead’s final words penetrated his addled psyche.

“Will you open your eyes, young Master? Or shall I strip the very skin from your face until they are laid bare?”

Richter just kept his eyes screwed shut.

“Very well,” Singh intoned.

The chaos seed felt a razor-sharp line of magical force pierce his skin just below his hairline and he began to howl. With precision and detachment, the lich slowly moved the line across Richter’s forehead, cutting deep enough to score his skull. Hisako shouted inside of his mind with the twinleaf that the portal could not last much longer, but the chaos seed was lost in a world of pain. Alma’s heart broke at her love’s mental anguish, but she knew Richter would want her to finish the plan. The dragonling flew faster. Blood sluiced down Richter’s face and the line of force began to cut down the left side of his face. His arms swung against the lich’s body, but his unarmed attacks had no effect at all. The throat-crushing force of Singh’s grip made

casting impossible.

Singh continued to speak as he flayed Richter's face, "You have only yourself to blame for this. When I sent that fool Nien to find and kill you, I did not know if he would succeed. I certainly did not care if he returned. The bone, and my long explanation of how it worked, was for you. Only for your benefit. I still do not understand the power that lets you see into the past of your slain foes, but I recognized it as Thought magic. The very nature of my eldritch Power is to corrupt and subvert other forms of magic." The lich laughed, "I did not even need to use my magic this time. I only needed to dangle the bait, and you took it like a hungry striker cat. Once my forces have dealt with the minor disturbance your void pet has made, my undead horde will sweep through the portal and lay waste to the entire forest."

Richter was still screaming, but if he could have, he would have bared his teeth into a bloody grin. If the lich thought the portal would stay open long enough to send an army through, then the undead was the fool, not him!

The lich read something in Richter's body language. The lance of magical force stopped cutting, "You believe that I have not already seen the instability of the gateway. You believe it will close before my forces can cross over. That is only because you believe that your allies have control of it. I am merely allowing them to feed it with their mana, and every passing minute makes them weaker. Rest assured, as soon as their resources run dry,

the magic of the Mausoleum will take over and the portal will be mine to command.”

Richter’s momentary joy turned to ashes in his mouth. Is he reading my mind, he cried out in his own head before realizing that was not the right response to Singh’s words. Using the twinleaf, he shouted to Hisako, **Close the portal! The lich is going to take control of it!**

His warning came far too late. Singh had outthought them all. In a panic, Hisako tried to close the doorway, but the lich had cast his spell weeks in advance. Before he had even given the eldritch bone to Nien, Singh had already laid his trap. As soon as the gateway had been established, his spell was activated. Whether Hisako ran out of mana or tried to close the gateway intentionally, his spell was prepared to take control. Now that the Hearth Mother attempted to break contact with the gateway, the trap sprang shut.

Eldritch magic surged up from between the dark grey blocks in streams of malignant power. The Mausoleum itself fed the fading energy of the portal, which stabilized and began to grow larger. The allied forces looked on in fear as the golden energy that had surrounded the edges was replaced by the parasitic green of eldritch magic.

Hisako cried out from spell shock as control was wrenched away from her. The Hearth Mother fell to the ground senseless and would have tipped

over the edge of the battlements if not for the support of her watchful attendants. The direction of the wind reversed as the polarity of the portal was reversed. That change brought the noxious stink of the Mausoleum into the Dungeon. With fear and steel battling in his heart, Terrod called an order, “Retreat to the Barbican! Protect the Hearth Mother!”

The allied forces all fled behind the walls as the portal grew larger and larger. One edge connected with a red stone pillar and the stone was vaporized by the magic of the doorway. The orientation also changed, no longer at a cant, but instead perpendicular to the floor of the Mausoleum. Every member of both allied armies could now see the titanic battle between the devastator skeleton and the void chain mauler. The undead could also now see all of them. In response to the silent command of the lich lord, several hundred broke off from their battle with the mauler’s suborned army and rushed up the stairs. The matte black figures of voidlings chased after them.

The sprites Richter had left behind to guard the portal had done their duty. Dozens of undead had been slain. The sprite leader had begun to kindle the hope that they might actually hold their position, but there was no stopping the tsunami of undead that were now rushing up the stairway. The sprite captain called a retreat and they fled through the portal as well. Before they crossed the magical boundary, the sprites all showed their true merit by

picking up the bodies of slain comrades and allies. They would not leave them to be defiled by the lich and his armies. So laden, they ran as fast as they could, not stopping until they had passed through the entrance to the Barbican and the portcullis slammed shut behind them. Then they turned and set down the bodies of the fallen. A moment later, they placed arrows on their bow strings, ready to defend the Hearth Mother and their allies with their last breath.

As all of this was happening, Singh watched the interplay of emotions on Richter's bloody face. One corner of the chaos seed's forehead was already beginning to sag from the cuts he had made. The lich reached out to that corner, and began to pull Richter's skin free in a solid bloody flap. The chaos seed couldn't help it. His eyes flew open involuntarily as a scream of pure agony ripped out of his mind. Quick as a cobra, Singh looked in his eyes, but Richter was able to shut them again. He just wasn't able to do it fast enough. The lich hadn't been able to make a proper psychic bond, but he did catch a glimpse of something. Something Richter had been hiding and buying time for.

"What is it you are thinking?" Singh thundered. The eldritch Mage struck him across the face, knocking him to the ground. As Richter was picked back up, the lich shouted into his face, "*You will* show me your eyes!" The chaos seed felt the agony return as the lich's magic began to cut

into his face again. Singh was no longer content to taunt and play with his captive, and the magical scalpel cut deeper and faster than before. Despair threatened to overwhelm Richter. Alma needed time! He didn't even know how he was still conscious now! He could *not* let the lich know the true plan, but how long could he hold out against his face being cut free from his own skull?

Screams issued from his mouth and he almost succumbed, but then his mind registered something that he had seen during that brief moment when his eyes had flashed open. His will firmed. He knew what he had to do. "Okay! Alright!" Richter shouted in a strangled and pained voice. The lich had let go of his throat when he was shaking him, but the crushing grip had left serious damage behind. "Just let me speak!"

"You do not need to speak to obey me," the lich answered, grabbing his throat and squeezing once more

"Things... you need... to know!" came the chaos seed's raspy response.

Singh regarded him for a moment, but finally relaxed his grip with a warning, "Do not test me, young Master."

Richter took a step back and to the side. "I promise. I will tell you the most important thing I know." The lich's gaze followed him and the

undead took a half step forward, keeping any distance from forming between the two of them. “What you need to know. What you should already know... is that sprites... are really good climbers.”

CHAPTER 103 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



The lich cocked his head in confusion, then his eyes widened in understanding. He whipped his head around and saw Sion standing on the edge of precipice. Both of the sprite's hands were raised, one forming the universal symbol of sprite disrespect, and the other with the middle finger extended. The lich, who had touted his own superiority and brilliance, fell for a simple ‘made you look.’

Somehow, that made what Richter did next so much sweeter. That one second of distraction was all he needed to use one of his most expensive items. The chaos seed’s hand shot into his Bag of Holding and he summoned what he needed directly into his hand. The Bottled Elder Banshee Scream had cost him the equivalent of nearly ten thousand dollars in gold. It only worked if you got close, but Abbas’s sons had promised that it was extremely powerful against casters. If this didn’t work, Richter planned to... well, he realized he would pretty much be dead at that point and therefore in

no position to ask for a refund, so he just hoped it worked.

Unstopping the bottle, it wasn't just a scream that issued forth but a simulacrum of the monster itself. An ethereal creature, blue and green in color, welled out like a genie and screamed at the lich who stood only two feet away. Even being outside of the cone of attack, the sound made Richter's ears bleed and he collapsed to both knees again. The effect on the eldritch magus was much worse. Prompts appeared in Richter's vision like messages from heaven. Singh collapsed while the banshee dissipated like smoke on the wind.

BEGIN COMBAT LOG

Richter hits Singh with Elder Banshee Scream!

Singh is Deafened!

Singh is Silenced!

Singh is Disoriented!

Singh resists Madness!

Singh is Blinded!

Singh resists Bleeding due to 100% lich immunity to this debuff!

Singh is Stunned!

Singh takes 1,771 (base 2,530 x 0.7) points of Direct Damage! (Damage from Death creatures decreased by 30% due to ownership of Level 3 Mausoleum)

END COMBAT LOG

Seventeen hundred points of damage and Singh was still alive? The chaos seed couldn't believe it, but he still cheered internally. His jubilation faded though as one of the green prompts started flashing red, showing that the *Stun* debuff would wear off in a matter of seconds. He had planned to keep attacking, but seeing how much of a hit Singh could take and keep standing, coupled with the fact that Richter was weaponless and the debuffs would wear off in seconds, he decided to go with a different plan.

Still, there was one thing he just couldn't resist. Richter moved as quickly as his ruined body would allow to get to Singh's side. Though it made him feel like he was going to piss blood, he still couldn't help kicking the lich's legs out from under him. The *Stun* effect had left Singh standing upright and listing slightly side-to-side, but he crumpled to the ground after that. He'd never seen a more beautiful sight than the undead's body collapsing to the ground. The emerald staff remained upright.

Sion rushed towards the doorway, "Is that going to kill him?" the

sprite shouted. Both Companions had lost some of their own hearing even though they hadn't been in the direct cone of the banshee's wail.

In Richter's vision, a green line turned red. His stomach twisted as he realized the *Stun* debuff had worn off completely. That feeling worsened when the *Blinded* debuff began to flash. It only flickered for one second before turning completely red. The lich's sight was restored. His eyes burned neon green and the illusion of his flesh began to burn away. The only thing hotter than the flames eating away Singh's false sprite face was the burning hatred in the undead's gaze. Singh opened his mouth to cast, but the *Silence* debuff still held. The fires in his eyes burned brighter.

"I really doubt it," Richter shouted back as the lich started to climb to his feet. "Tell me you still have the bottle!"

Sion didn't speak, he just held up the spell-scribed glass in one hand. Richter took it from him and scooped up his bow, handing it to the sprite. Sion had lost both his arrows and bow when he'd gone over the side.

"Get ready to break it!" Richter shouted.

"While we're standing here?" Sion asked looking at him wildly. "Are you crazy? What about Plan B?"

"She needs more time," Richter shouted back. He hadn't heard from Alma yet, but he knew she would speak to him as soon as she was ready.

The two of them started moving at a shamble towards the wall of faces. The blood pouring down the chaos seed's face effectively blinded his left eye, but he was still able to see well enough to pick up Black Ice along the way.

There was no way he could make it over the one hundred yards of traps with his battered body, let alone with Sion on his back, but that didn't change the fact that his friend was right. They needed to put some distance between themselves and wherever the bottle would break. Even if they just stayed on the other side of the wall, it was better than being out in the open.

What was contained inside of the spell-scribed bottle would make the banshee scream seem like a soft summer wind. All he could think to do was get beyond the wall and shatter the bottle behind them. Hopefully it would kill the lich and buy him and Sion enough time to climb the wall of faces. If they got high enough, then the extra elevation might just let him Cloud Run the two of them across the traps to the sarcophagus. It was a fool's chance that the lich would leave them alone long enough to do that, but at least it was a chance.

The two of them were almost at the wall when the lich summoned the emerald staff to his hand. At an exertion of Singh's will, the eyes and mouth of every face snapped shut, including the large one that served as the door. All that was left was a solid wall of Core-enhanced metal. The Companions both looked at Singh, fear seizing their guts. The lich was unsteady on his

feet, the *Disorient* debuff still in effect, but the *Deafened* and *Silence* debuffs had both started to flicker. Richter cursed. The lich's magic resistance was insane!

The chaos seed came to another split-second decision. Turning back the way they had come, he ran as fast as he could, pulling Sion after him. If they couldn't get through the wall, they could at least make it to the end of the platform. As the two Companions moved at a shambling gait, the lich aimed his staff. Three seconds later, a foot-wide beam of pure eldritch magic shot through the air.

The blast missed by inches, and the lich silently cursed his poor aim. If not for the *Silence* debuff Singh would not have been limited to his staff's primary attack, and if not for *Disorient* all that would be left of the two friends would be chunks of seared flesh. Richter planned to *kiss* Abbas the next time he saw him, but for the moment he contented himself with running for his life.

Singh stared daggers at the two men as they moved further away, but was not overly concerned. There was nowhere for they could run. The walkway ended after only one hundred yards, and only the abyss remained after that. He took aim again and pulses of energy built in the emerald. The staff's attack could be used without a verbal component, but luckily for the two Companions, it took several seconds to recharge.

The chaos seed looked behind him and saw the pulses coming faster in the giant green gem. They were almost out of time. They'd only been able to put fifteen yards between themselves and the lich, but it would have to be enough. Richter stopped his injured stumbling and faced the undead magus, the bottle held in his hand, cocked and ready.

"Are you sure about this?" Sion asked, his tone making it clear that he personally was anything but.

"Just say the words and shoot!" the chaos seed responded. Then, facing down the lich and his staff of terrible power, he threw the bottle at him. When it had crossed half the distance, Sion fired an imbued arrow that struck the spell scribed glass with a small *boom*. In that instant, three things happened. One, the remaining forty-nine points of durability were removed from the Containment Bottle. Two, the greater wind demon inside was released without the containment circle to keep it in check. Three, two best friends shouted the same phrase, releasing the words for the first time into The Land!

"Lerrrrrooyyyy Jennnkiinnssss!"

There was no slow buildup, no calm before the storm. In one instant there were the three enemies atop the walkway. In the next, an actual demon stood between them. Richter hadn't known what to expect. Maybe a tornado

with claws and talons. Maybe some sort of sharp-toothed monster. The demon didn't look like either of those two things.

He looked like an angel.

Standing twelve feet in height, the demon's chest was bare. His skin was the dark blue of a storm-promised sky. Two large wings rose from his back, and each feather on them looked sharp enough to slice through shields. His body was humanoid, but his feet ended in two eagle's claws. He was heavily muscled and a massive penis hung between his legs. As daunting as that was, it was his face that immediately grabbed the attention of the three people on the rooftop. The expression was cold and harsh, yet undeniably beautiful. This was a creature to be feared... and worshiped. His eyes were two orbs of swirling blue-black lightning and the same energy played over his wings.

The demon screamed in equal parts rage and triumph. After centuries of confinement, he was free! He raised both of his arms in glory to his own majesty, and his wings extended out ten feet to a side. A moment later, his gaze swept over the lesser creatures standing nearby. First, he looked over the lich and his charging emerald staff, but found nothing to hold his gaze. Next, he turned his terrible lightning eyes upon Richter and Sion. The chaos seed wasted no time.

He had hoped it would not come to this, that the demon would not have to be released, but in case it had to be, Richter had prepared as best he could. His Gift of Tongues ability would not work on *higher* or *lower* languages, so Richter had known he wouldn't be able to speak the demon's language. Luckily, where his ability failed, the Hearth Mother's knowledge had succeeded. Whether it was due to her centuries of study or her insanely high Lore level, she had known how to translate a simple message into the Common equivalent of Daemonspake. Part of him screamed that this was stupid, but another part knew that if you were going to do something stupid, you committed! Pulling Sion into a confused bow, he shouted the words Hisako had taught him.

“Aet knaroq gazcise hig! Cru undead lizt oevit kru! Haik ttoru ciq!”

Richter had basically just said, “Greetings, mighty demon lord! The undead creature is going to attack you! You should kill him first!” He'd been a bit surprised that undead was the same word in Daemonspake and Common, but apparently it was just one of those things. Now he just had to hope that he hadn't totally whiffed the delivery. An “ich bin ein Berliner” situation with a giant demon and a pissed off lich lord was not what he needed!

Silence reigned for a long second, but Richter remained in a bow. His heart thudded painfully, afraid the demon would snuff him and Sion out of

existence at any moment. Thankfully, the lich broke the silence, “What did you say to this thing?”

Richter might not have spoken Daemonspake, but the demon spoke Common with no difficulty at all. The demonic being lasered in on the lich and took a step towards the undead. It seemed that a greater Air demon didn’t like being called “thing.” That one step was all it took.

Singh let all of the charged magic in his staff loose at once. The entire beam shot into the demon’s chest and began to burn. The freed hellion’s perfectly sculpted body blackened, but only for a moment. Without even needing to speak a word of Power, armor sculpted of hurricane winds covered him from head to toe, and an axe of pure blue-black lightning appeared in his hand. The demon’s right wing snapped forward and acted as a shield to block the lich’s attack. Some of the metal feathers sloughed off where the eldritch beam struck, but it was clear that the wing was as strong a defense as a tower shield.

With a growl, the demon snapped his axe down in mighty overhand blow. The lich showed fear for the first time, lifting his staff with a snarl. A bubble of neon-green light phased into existence and stopped the blow cold. Electricity played over the entire magic shield and would surely have harmed the lich if the shield hadn’t completely encapsulated his body. Singh pointed his free hand at the demon and cast a spell that shot a spike of pure metal

from the floor into the demon's back. The monster spun, using his two wings as curved shields, but the eldritch Earth attack still scored heavily. Feathers and a few drops of black blood fell to the ground.

The demon cursed in Daemonspake and threw his own hand forward. A cyclone of biting winds mixed with lightning shot against the lich's magic shield, buckling it inward. This time, it was Singh who cursed. His barrier began to fail, but the undead raked a hand upward and a wall of grey metal shot up from the floor, bisecting and disrupting the lightning vortex.

The battle continued between the two powerful creatures. The demon might have easily bested Singh in almost any other setting, but in the center of the lich's power with the powers of the Mausoleum to call upon, the fallen angel's victory was not assured. The two battered Companions watched the fight unfold, knowing that either of the two monsters outclassed the both of them put together. No matter who won, the victor would undoubtedly destroy them immediately after. The two looked at each other as they continued moving towards the end of the walkway. Both men were sharing the same thought. We're fucked.

As the battle between the demon and the lich raged, the allied forces of the Mist Village and Hearth Tree waged their own war. The few wounded that had been brought back through the portal had been sorted into those that could be healed later, those that were only moments from death and those

that could not be saved. The first and third groups were carried to the House of Healing by a small army of waiting mist workers. The second group was being ministered to by the village's healers, using both magical and non-magical methods.

While the healers performed their duties, the fighting men and women of the allied forces were engaged in battle. Undead had poured through the portal. On four legs and two, resurrected creatures fought alongside undead melee fighters, archers, magi and rogues. The sprites let loose with imbued arrows, blasting the first wave of Death creatures to pieces. All except one skeleton that was completely black.

The voidling took three hits from imbued arrows at a distance of only two dozen yards. It was knocked to the ground but got back up, a horrid scream issuing forth. The archers sighted upon it again, but a commanding voice stopped them. Sumiko strode to the front of the battlements and dual cast a powerful spell. *Life's Reckoning* only harmed the undead, but the sixth-tier spell unleashed an inferno of Life energy into the voidling.

The unnatural creature had been corrupted by the void mauler's chains of dominance, but enough of its original nature remained that it was susceptible to her Power. It shook like it was being vibrated apart at the molecular level and golden light began to seep through cracks in the black void magic that coated it. While it fought Sumiko's magic, a second wave of

undead came through the portal and began to attack it. Two seconds later every one of the voidling's bones exploded, and five undead were also destroyed in the blast. Sumiko ducked behind a battlement, her head throbbing from having channeled such powerful magic. She lay her back against the stone, and more than one archer on the battlement sent her a look of praise and appreciation.

Melee undead began hacking at the portcullis. The bars were not only steel, but were also strengthened by the magic of the Dungeon. Despite that, the attacks of Professed Warriors could not be ignored and the metal began to bend under the hammer and axe blows of the undead. The meidon and wood sprites fired down from the battlements and through the portcullis. Their imbued magic took a heavy toll on the attackers, but the physical damage was massively reduced due to the undead's nature.

The skeletons had no vital organs in their torsos and zombies did not fall in pain when an arrow struck their leg. Head shots could destroy the lower level zombies, but skeletons shrugged such blows off. Many of the invaders wore armor which stopped critical shots.

The undead also had ranged fighters of their own. Arrows enchanted with Death magic or tipped with poison and disease shot up at the Barbican's defenders. Four sprites died within the first minutes of the attack and twice as many were injured to varying extents. The allied forces continued to fight,

bolstered by the second-tier Fighting Spirit of the Mist Village, but more enemies continued to pour through the portal. All the while, the battle between the devastator and the mauler grew closer to the gateway as well.

Richer and Sion knew none of this. Their attention was completely focused on the behemoths battling before them. Singh and the demon had released insane amounts of power in their battle and neither was showing signs of stopping. Richter and Sion had needed to dodge stray bolts of lightning and beams of eldritch energy. Any of them could have killed either Companion even though they were not the intended targets. Worse, the battle between the two unnatural creatures was moving closer towards the end of the metal walkway. That meant it was getting closer to the two mortals who wanted no part of it.

“Okay,” Richter whispered with near panic in his voice, “fuck this. We’ve got to get out of here. Get on my back.”

“Why? The lich closed the wall, and besides, there is a *demon* between us and it.”

“I know!” Richter shot back, irritated. “They’re a lot *farther* from the wall now though. I can cloud run us out into space, then run back to the walkway when we’re past.”

“And just hope that they don’t see us?” Sion demanded.

“Yeah,” Richter snapped. “Then we’ll have to climb the wall.”

“That wall is two hundred yards high!”

“Then we better get started!”

“You do realize that I was shot with my own imbued arrow, right?
Now you want me to hang off your back and scale a gigantic wall?”

“I got shot too! And I have a way bigger mana pool than you!”

“Pfff. Your weak-ass skill level in Imbue Arrow doesn’t pack nearly as much punch as mine,” the sprite fired back at him. “I also got thrown off a roof!”

“You’re complaining about that?” Richter yelled incredulously.
“Look at my face. He cut off half my fucking face!”

Both friends were just psyching themselves up to literally run out over the abyss, something that was admittedly dodgy considering all the injuries they’d just listed. They were also both secretly praying that lich and demon would just tumble off the roof and solve all their problems. Singh spared a furious glance at the two bickering friends, but a near-decapitating attack of the demon’s lightning axe made him focus on his enemy once more.

The Companions had seen the anger in Singh’s face. That convinced Sion of the wisdom of Richter’s plan. A second later, the chaos seed was on the move. As his foot glided out over empty space, his internal injuries

shifted. The pain made him stumble and Sion cried out in panic as they dropped suddenly, but Richter found his footing and pushed hard off the air with his next step. It made his vision blur, but they gained altitude and he kept running.

While they circled the two monsters, Richter risked a glance over at Singh. It was with a sigh of relief that he saw that both demon and lich were too busy to target them. For a moment, the chaos seed was tempted to *Analyze* the hellish creature, but he didn't dare risk it. If it felt his inspection the way Singh had, it might attack them. Instead, he focused on running. Even with Richter's injuries, they successfully circled around the high-level battle and made it back to the walkway. Sion hopped off and they prepared to climb.

Even though Singh had not been able to attack them while they were over the abyss, seeing them about to climb the wall was too much. He would not let them escape! Richter was the reason the demon was here at all and the hellion had caused him pain for the first time in centuries. If not for the Mausoleum he would have been destroyed already. Though neither the demon or mortals atop the roof knew it, each time he suffered damage the majority of it was transferred to one of his minions. The Core building not only let him control a massive undead army, it let him call upon their power as well. Even the damage of the banshee scream would have destroyed him

if he hadn't channeled most of the damage to his undead slaves. Even so, Richter's attack had cost the lich over a hundred health and several Professional undead had suffered the final death. Singh would not let these affronts pass!

The one thing the lich hadn't lied about was the timing of drawing energy from the Exile he worshipped. If he were fighting the demon only one day later, then all the energy contained in the giant sphere of magic above would be his to command. Right now, however, the magic was completely wild and as much a danger to him as his enemies. That did not mean Singh didn't have access to other hidden reservoirs of Power.

With a scream of rage, Singh revealed the true majesty of the Mausoleum. Not only did it allow him to maintain an army of undead and defer damage, but since the building had reached the third level he could also sacrifice his slaves to fuel his own magic. At hearing the scream, both Companion looked backwards in alarm. Even the demon jumped back in surprise. Literal waves of power were coming off the lich, spilling out over the floor. A magical shield so powerful that it emitted blinding light had sprung up around him like a globe.

The humanesque visage Singh had adopted before was completely consumed by the eldritch power being channeled through his body. Now the lich stood in all his unnatural and desiccated glory. He siphoned every ounce

of his strength, drawing it willingly from his minions. Ten percent of his army dropped lifeless at once, draining the maximum amount of mana that he could siphon in a day. The voidlings fighting the undead roared in triumph as they pressed their attack, but none of that mattered to Singh. His power was now legion!

The demon felt the growing strength of his enemy and summoned a lance of pure hell lightning. In response, the lich conjured a bolt of eldritch power. The two nightmare magi threw their magic at the same time. Though the power of the greater demon could lay waste to an army, the magic the lich now had at his command could sunder entire cities. The two powers met and the demon's attack was overcome.

The bolt of neon-green magic consumed the blue-grey lightning and blasted into the demon's face. The winged being's face charred to the bone in an instant, but the hellish creature still did not die. His skull opened in a silent scream. The blast of eldritch magic worked its way through the demon's body and began to dissolve him from the inside out. Even his armored wings were ruined.

Through it all, the demon continued to reach towards the lich, unwilling or unable to actually be destroyed. With a snarl, Singh released the last of his gathered energy and the intensity of the beam he was firing doubled, flinging the demon off the ledge. Unlike Sion, the monster didn't

just slide off. He was catapulted out into space. The last Richter saw of him was the demon's ruined wings flapping in vain as he dropped into the deep.

The lich turned his burning green gaze on the two Companions, wrath and fury in his eyes. Words of Power began to fall from his lips.

"Remind me what we were supposed to do when one of them won," Sion said backing away from the furious lich.

"Yeah," Richter said, backing up as well. "I actually hadn't figured that part out yet. That's why we shouted 'Leroy Jenkins' when we released the demon."

"What?" Sion asked, his eyes still on the lich. "I thought that was a battle cry from your homeland."

"Nope," Richter said eyeing the undead mage. "More of a 'we're totally fucked and I hope this works' cry. Don't look him in the eyes!"

Before Sion could respond, Singh finished his spell and the caster took complete control of their bodies. Both men struggled, but they were under the thrall of a *master* magician. A moment later they were kneeling. Even with Richter's high Wisdom, he had no defense against the true grandeur of Singh's power.

"You vex me, human!" The cultured voice was gone, replaced by the rasping sounds of death. Somehow, even that paper-scraping tone still

dripped venom, “Your demon harmed me, but I promise, you will suffer every ounce of pain he delivered one *thousand* times over.” Singh stopped before him, “No more games. You will meet my eyes or I will pull your friend’s very soul from his body.” The lich spoke a spidery word of Power and Sion began to scream.

Richter could not bear the sound. Besides, while Singh had been threatening them, he had finally heard from his beloved familiar and had sent a return message. He just needed a bit more time, and he’d be damned if he let Sion suffer to gain it. The chaos seed stared up at the lich and the monster inside of him stared out as well, “You want to see into my eyes? Go ahead. Look at them. Look at them, but I’ve got to warn you. You won’t like what you see!”

The undead’s glowing green eyes met his own and their minds linked!

*You have engaged in **Psychic Battle** with the **Lich Singh**.*

Once again, Richter was in his mindscape and found another psychic realm bordering his own. When he had connected with Nien, the Death Knight’s mind had been a dead and barren tableau of twisted trees. The melee fighter was deadly in the extreme in physical combat, but had possessed little in the way of mental defenses. Not so his master.

From Richter’s perch atop his one-story fort, he saw Singh’s

mindscape. It was dominated by a single structure, a smaller version of the Mausoleum. Singh's mental defenses were four stories tall and armored skeletons patrolled each level, representations of both the lich's mental defenses and attack capabilities. At the summit stood Singh himself.

The undead wasted no time. He raised his hands and eldritch energy spilled from them and down the Mausoleum. It blanketed the entire structure and every skeleton grew stronger as the lich accessed the Deeper Magic of Thought. Each undead defender grew larger, and when the neon-green energy touched the ground even more skeletons began to rise.

“You may think you have psychic power,” the lich taunted, “but I unlocked the Thought aspect of my eldritch magic long ago. You will find no safety here. I will have all of your secrets, and then you shall serve me and suffer for eternity!” Singh cast his hand forward and the skeletons surged from his mindscape into Richter's.

Keep laughing asshole, Richter thought silently. He abandoned the battlement of his fort and retreated down the steps into the one fortified room the fort contained. Shutting the door, he summoned a light. There was nothing in the small room, just blocks of white stone and a door, but it might buy him more time. Alma was still too far away to manifest inside his mindscape, but she was close enough to communicate with.

The time dilation effect of the mindscape would have made it nearly impossible to speak with any non-Mental creature, but Alma's psi dragon nature could account for that and so much more. He sent her a message about what was happening. After a short conversation, she sent back a simple promise of love, **I'm coming, master!**

Richter could do nothing but wait. It didn't take long watching through Alma's eyes to see that the lich's mental power made the time dilation of the mindscape even stronger than when the chaos seed entered on his own. The dragonling could fly incredibly fast. With her Agility of thirty-six and her flight enhancement of 30%, she was four and half times faster than when she'd first entered The Land as a level one beast. Even back then she'd been able to outfly half the birds in the forest. Now she was a sleek and powerful predator, slicing through the air. Sadly, her speed didn't help nearly as much though, not when every second in the real world took what he guessed to be thirty to forty seconds in the mindscape.

He sat there and listened to the thuds of the undead beating against the fort's gates. In only minutes, he heard the sound of wood breaking. The undead flooded into the simple stone fort and found the inner door. Then he heard chopping noises. On the twelfth dull thud, Richter saw the tip of an axe pierce the door. Guttural sounds of savagery issued from the undead, mixing with the dull *thunks* of their weapons striking the door.

Hurry, my love, he thought to her, but he did not actually send the message. Richter knew she was doing her best. Instead, with only the psychic equivalent of a wooden door between his mind and the lich's attack constructs, he thought about his life in The Land. He reflected on the friendships he'd made, the battles he'd fought, and the people he'd freed. He thought about the mistakes that he'd committed, the horrible things that he'd done and the moral allowances that he'd become comfortable with. He thought about Caulder and Petal and Mama and Sion. He thought about Alma. Richter weighed all of this in his mind and knew, as much as he'd ever known anything, that he'd been blessed. It had been a good ride. That was one reason that he was smiling slightly as the undead broke down the door. He came out of the room punching and kicking, Intelligence-enhanced mental attacks fracturing bones and splitting skulls, but his fight lasted only seconds. The undead constructs bore him to the ground and then pulled him outside, their bony fingers scoring deep in the flesh of his avatar.

A minute later in the mindscape, seconds later in the real world, Richter was kneeling in the grass outside his fort and Singh stood above him. He stared up at the eldritch mage in defiance, still struggling to stand and break free, but the undead minions held him fast. "You will never get my name or the secrets of my past!" Richter spat with pure vehemence. The lich did not waste time replying. Singh just placed a withered hand on his head

and ripped his mind apart.

First, the lich first found his true name. This was not merely out of spite, but also because it was what he would use to bind Richter's soul to his service forever. "James" was a name Singh had never heard. That fact, coupled with the chaos seed's challenge, made him dig deeper into Richter's past. The lich was extremely confused that there was a section of the chaos seed's memory he could not reach. It was a formless grey expanse that somehow accounted for only seconds of Richter's life, but also seemed to span centuries. Try as he might, Singh could not pierce the veil and access those memories. The only reason that should happen is if a magic stronger than his own opposed him, but he knew the chaos seed could not even begin to match his strength in Thought magic.

After trying several times, Singh just bypassed those memories and examined Richter's time on Earth. What he saw changed the lich's view of the world forever. After centuries devoted to magic, he saw the power of technology. He searched through Richter's mind with greater and greater urgency. An obsession formed in moments. Singh needed to see more, to know more, to understand that possibilities of science and, most importantly, to find a way to control these new pathways to Power. Even technologies that did not exist on Earth might be possible when wedded to his magic. Searching the mind of the chaos seed, the lich was entranced by the endless

possibilities as surely as if he had been enchanted.

The lich dwelt in Richter's memory for long minutes. He would have continued to do so, but a drawn out and thudding *boom* disturbed him. It was possible to remain aware of both the real world and the mindscape with focus, but the lich had never been properly trained in Thought magic. Eldritch magic was parasitical. It was only a perversion of the true nature of magical Powers. If Singh had been properly trained, he would know the very first lesson of psychic battle: "Do not let your mental focus distract you from physical dangers." It was a lesson known on Earth as, "Don't get dick punched while you're talking shit."

Unfortunately for Singh he had never heard either of those two pieces of wisdom, and so had fallen for Richter's simple gambit a second time. The chaos seed had been pretty sure a medieval fuck like the lich would be entranced by seeing the tech on Earth. If he hadn't been, if Richter's challenge that the lich would 'never know the secrets of his past' hadn't worked, hadn't made the caster waste time in those memories... well, it hadn't hurt to try. The point was, it *had* worked. Singh had been so obsessed with what he saw in Richter's past that he had given the chaos seed the one thing he truly needed. The child of Chaos had claimed one of the few Higher Energies greater than his namesake. He had gained time.

The rumbling grew even louder, the time dilation of the mindscape

distorting and elongating the sound. The fact that it was so loud that it had intruded upon the mental construct alarmed Singh. The lich began to break their psychic connection to investigate when Richter's avatar grinned fiercely. "It's too late, Singh. It's done!"

Eldritch light flared in the avatar's eyes, "What have you done, mortal?" He grabbed Richter's head in both hands again to rip the memories free, but this time the chaos seed did not resist. In fact, he almost forced one memory to the surface. Singh quickly saw that it was a recollection of what had occurred only minutes before. It began while Richter had still been kneeling with his eyes shut, just after the lich had taken control of his body. The undead *master* could feel the despair that was gripping Richter's heart. He also felt the blossoming joy when a beloved voice had echoed in the chaos seed's mind.

I am here, master, Alma had sent. She had shown him a view of the statue close up. She had discovered that it was made of simple stone, not the grey metal that comprised the Mausoleum. She had also shared why it had taken her so long to fly to the statue. While Sion and Richter had fought the lich, she had engaged in battles of her own. It turned out that she was not the only flier in the cavern. Her passage had drawn the attention of spirits that roamed the air above the Mausoleum.

The Core building completely cut her off from her Life magic,

meaning the only ranged attacks she could rely on were *Weak Lightning* and her *Psi Blast*. Even using her Air magic was impossible because she could not risk the flare of magic giving away her position. As dozens of phantasms shrieked in to attack, she had used *Psi Blast* on the first few but it had barely had an effect. The disembodied spirits were much less susceptible to her psychic attack than corporeal undead like zombies and ghouls. Even if her blast had been effective, the attack had a several-minute cooldown and the ravenous ghosts were coming from every direction. In desperation, she had flown as fast as she could, but she was surrounded. Dozens of spirits closed in on her at once. Then something wonderful happened, and she learned that evasion was not her best weapon.

The dragonling had been completely hemmed in. After several seconds of pushing her agile body into extreme contortions to avoid the insubstantial undead, she had had no further way to avoid them. With anger in her small heart, she had extended her claws as the distance between her and a spirit closed to zero... and had rent it to shreds!

The truesilver of her new armor grew warm on her scales as it protected her body from their attacks, but her forged claws were absolutely devastating. The 100% boost to damage against *evil* creatures had made her new armament more powerful than Richter's Named weapon. As she had met that first spirit head on, it was brought low! Her truesilver claws bisected

the phantom and she flew completely through it. The remnants of the ghost faded away to nothing more than dust. With a savage glee, she had turned on the rest.

The phantoms were not members of the lich's army. They were half-mad creatures that had been attracted by the Death energy of the Mausoleum. The ghosts were only levels twelve to fifteen, well below Alma's own level, but in The Land, levels weren't everything. A level one dragon would still destroy a level fifty rabbit any day of the week. No, in The Land, levels did not always predict which creature had the most power, but in this case... they did.

Alma couldn't ignore the one hundred-plus spirits that were trying to rend her armored body and unarmored wings, but she could destroy them. It had taken several minutes, but she'd been able to deliver the final death to more than forty of the phantoms. She had received small cuts, and at one point her wings were almost torn, but tucking them close into her body and suddenly dropping had saved her. After so many of the ghosts were delivered the final death, even the dead learned fear and fled from the well-armored dragonling. Then she had flown straight to the statue.

After circling it twice, she had found what she was looking for. The idol was gigantic, but the legs had been sculpted together to form a single base that supported the whole structure. At the carved ankles, there was a

deep divot where they met. It was exactly what her master had told her to look for. That was where she placed the chemical bombs.

Singh absorbed all of this information in moments, as well as the last bit of memory Richter was pushing upon him. It was a simple conversation that had happened a few minutes later, as it was counted in the mindscape. A short dialogue that had occurred while the chaos seed had been barricaded inside his mental fort. Singh could hear the *thunking* sound of his undead constructs beating through the door, but what the lich focused on was the conversation Richter was having with his familiar

*“I have placed both devices, master. Should I activate them?**

Do it, Richter had commanded grimly, **but haste Weak Haste first. You cannot be within the radius of the explosion when it goes off!**

A second later, Alma frantically sent, **I twisted the pins!** Through her visual feed, he could see her flying as fast as possible on her newly-enhanced wings.

Richter hadn't sent her any other psychic messages after that, but his avatar had started talking out loud while he waited for the undead to break down the door. What kept Singh's attention was that the words were addressed to him.

“Now, I'm pretty sure I'm going to be taken captive, and also that you

will be able to read this memory, Singh. So, let me just take a second and say... fuck you and your mother, you dried-up dickless motherfucker! I mean, if you were *dumb* enough to let me distract you with my past, then it's already too late for you to stop our plan. Even if I wasn't able to distract you, I figure I'll just keep talking because if you're still listening then I'm wasting even more of your time. I mean seriously, how have you not figured this out yet? Well, I guess I'll just keep babbling away, you dusty queef. I hope y--"

Singh snatched his consciousness out of the memory and looked down at Richter's avatar with horror and panic on his undead face. Less than a second had passed in the real world since they had both perceived the beginning of the massive boom, though nearly thirty had passed in the mindscape. The sound of the *BOOM* was growing even louder.

"What have you done!" Singh screamed at Richter.

Being held down by undead constructs in the mindscape and magically restrained in the real world, his mind having been violated and his entire physical body savaged, Richter's avatar still looked up at Singh with a vicious smile on his face, "I got you good, you fucker! Say hello to Plan B!"

Another *BOOM* shook the mindscape as the second chemical bomb detonated. In a panic, Singh broke the psychic connection to devote his entire focus to what had happened while he had been distracted by Richter's

memories. One moment, the chaos seed was being held down and the lich's mindscape bordered his own. The next, Richter's avatar was alone and Singh's Mausoleum had vanished. His mind felt as if it were a deck of cards that had been shuffled, but his will was unyielding iron.

It was time to end this.

CHAPTER 104 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



Richter snapped out of the mindscape less than a real-world second after the lich. Singh was already turning towards the statue. The sound that was echoing through the cavern was deafening. Singh and Richter had snapped back into reality fast enough that they both heard the tail end of the titanic **BOOM** that had shaken the entire cavern.

A billowing cloud of silver and red-orange flame was still rising into the air. The tremors from the explosion were so powerful that stalactites began to fall from the ceiling high above. A shockwave permeated the entire cave, knocking down undead and voidlings alike. The only creatures unaffected were the devastator, mauler and Singh, due to a hastily summoned magic shield. Sion and Richter had no such defense, and were tossed through the air. That was less important than the fact that they had control of their bodies once more.

Though he was battered all to hell, Richter sent a desperate query to

his familiar, **Are you alright, my love?**

I will be with you soon, master, she responded fiercely. **Small pieces of rock hit me, but my armor withstood it. The statue is falling!**

Richter looked up to see for himself. For a moment, it looked like nothing was happening. Alma had the benefit of a view that he lacked though. She had already glanced backward as she flew and had seen the immense damage the celestial-abyssal bombs had wrought. The alcove made by the two sculpted legs had channeled the blast inward and to the sides. The ankles of the statue, many tons of heavy stone, had been reduced to rubble, dust and two thin pillars at the back right and left. When she had said the statue was falling, it was because her keen eyes could see that those two compromised stands of rock were beginning to crumble. As Richter watched through her eyes, they collapsed simultaneously and the statue dropped forty feet but remained upright, like a tree that had part of its trunk removed all at once.

There was a dull *thud* as it dropped straight down. What Richter had seen when he looked up was the statue balancing on the uneven base left behind. Slowly, almost delicately, it began to tip forward.

“What have you done?” the lich screamed at him again. If the undead had hair, he would have been pulling it out in panic. Singh’s undead face

was livid and the green fires in his eyes were so intense that they were spilling out of the sockets.

Richter stood up and helped Sion to his feet as well, “I brought your fucking house down, man! I might have settled for just killing you, but your fucking coffin trap stole the soul of my friend. Doesn’t matter if we die as well, that statue is going to crush your Mausoleum and destroy it. You will regret ever having-”

“He will break the containment spell, you fool!” Singh interrupted with a panicked scream.

Richter blinked in confusion, wondering if this was some trick by the lich, but then a face appeared above the ball of magical energy that had been collecting in front of the statue. The chaos seed realized he had seen the visage before; it was the Exile Rakshasha, the same face on the statue. It was constructed of the shifting magical energy that had been accumulating in the sphere of magic.

**||YOU DARE TO DESTROY MY EFFIGY, SINGH?! YOU
THINK SO LITTLE OF MY GIFTS? THEN I SHALL GIVE YOU
MORE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE!||**

The voice had been so loud and so commanding that even though the Exiles were sequestered from this Realm, and even though they were

prevented from any direct action, every creature in the cavern from the lowest to the most powerful had stopped and witnessed the condemnation of the powerful being. The words resonated deep within every creature. Even the allied forces on the other side of the portal were affected on a primal level. At hearing the censure of a being older and more powerful than some gods, the reactions ranged from fear to adoration to fury. All creatures paused to bear witness. Thankfully, the deafening voice dissipated. There was a moment of pure silence and, in that instant, both Richter and Singh were united in the fool's hope that Rakshasha was done. Then the swirling ball of eldritch energy doubled in size.

The neon green color vanished, and it became a mixture of every magic in The Land. Reds clashed with blues and were swallowed by the blue-white of Thought. Demonic energy was laced with Death and then exploded by Angelic. Colors and magics that Richter had never conceived of were birthed and transformed in split seconds. The Exile could not directly affect the world, but he could control the flow of energy he was bequeathing upon his servant. He could moderate it... or let it spiral out of control. Based on the fact that the massive ball of energy was looking decidedly less spherical, there was no doubt which had been chosen. With a flash of intense fear, Richter realized what he was looking at: a ticking bomb. If mixing a small amount of opposing magics had been enough to destroy the statue,

what would happen when this globe of pure magical energy, containing dozens if not hundreds of opposing magics, finally reached critical mass? Richter got a hint of that answer when the first beam of destruction shot out of the sphere and into the falling statue.

The beam of magic was beyond comprehension. As wide as a bus, it made the energy the lich and demon had been bandying about look like thrown spears compared to a descending meteor. The statue simply... ceased to exist. The descending monument, Richter's hope for both freeing Caulder's soul and saving his people, was turned into pieces of stone no larger than boulders.

The chaos seed's hopes for victory turned to ashes in his mouth. It occurred to him that he might have been wrong. Maybe the Exile was actually protecting Singh and the Mausoleum. Maybe Richter had misunderstood the being's words. Maybe he had lost.

Richter looked at Singh, expecting to see triumph on the lich's face, but the undead had no time or attention for him. Instead, the eldritch mage was staring up at the sphere in frustrated rage. That was when Richter realized that though the statue had been destroyed, the broiling ball of magical energy was still growing. The chaos seed realized he'd been right the first time. The statue hadn't been destroyed to save the lich's kingdom. It was just the casualty of Rakshasha's vengeance. The next attack was a bolt

of Fire magic the size of a missile shot directly at the Mausoleum.

The beam of angry red energy struck the sixth floor. Not even the power of a Core building could withstand the raw power of the attack. Grey metal vaporized as wild magic removed twenty thousand points of durability in an instant. The metal to the sides of the beam's path turned to molten slag. Hundreds of undead were rendered into atoms in an instant, and in the corner of Richter's vision a prompt was instantly minimized to be reviewed if he survived.

"No. No!" the lich cried up to the cruel face. "Do not abandon me, my master!" The response was not what Singh had wanted.

Rakshasha looked down at Singh and for the first time, but not the last, Richter saw the implacability of a godlike being's displeasure. The Exile gave a simple command before disappearing, **||DIE!||**

The sphere expanded once more, spinning furiously, and bolts of magic began to fly out in every direction. One, as thick as Richter was tall, barreled directly at the roof that the Companions stood upon.

"Hit the deck!" Richter cried out, pulling Sion down with him.

The beam of Spirit and Dark magic shot over their heads and struck the wall of faces. The metal barrier burst apart with a deafening *CLANG*. The force of the magic beam's impact rippled the floor of the walkway like a

wave. Both Companions were thrown five feet into the air to fall down with a heavy thud a moment later. The lich was further from the impact and was still behind his shield, but the reverberations in the floor reached him nonetheless and threw him off his feet.

Richter looked at his fallen enemy with a fierce grin on his face. The wall was down. They might actually survive this. They might actually survive this! The chaos seed's heart filled with hope. Of course, that was when a deep rumble shook the walkway. Richter's smile turned into a wide-eyed "oh shit" face as the end of the platform began to tilt downward into the abyss.

You have to move, master! Alma screamed into his mind.

You think? he shot back, scrambling to his feet.

"We have to move," he shouted to Sion.

"You think?" the sprite spat. The two friends got to their feet, even ready to brave the traps if the alternative was falling into the abyss, but a voice stopped them.

"You will never reach the wall alive." Singh's snakeskin voice was thick with fury and hate as the Companions turned back to regard him. "I will survive this, but you will not. Before you die, know that when I have regained my strength and rebuilt my Mausoleum, I will see the Hearth Tree

burned down to cinders. As for your village, I will rip the life from the children and raise them again as undead. The last sight your people will have is of their cherished young feasting upon their own flesh.”

Richter turned towards the lich, “Well, that’s strikes two and three right there!”

Black Ice found its way into the chaos seed’s hand and the sprite knocked an arrow. Singh stared back, his emerald staff in hand. Mage, melee and archer squared off as the ground continued to shake beneath their feet. The walkway had stopped shifting, but there was now a definite incline.

“You two are no match for me,” Singh shouted in anger.

As Alma flew into view behind the lich, Richter just told him, “You don’t count so good.”

With bolts of energy flying above their heads in all directions, Alma unleashed one of her own. Her most-focused *Psi Blast* bathed the lich from behind. Even his shield could not block all of the Deeper Magic attack. Singh staggered back with a startled cry. His high Mental resistance saved him from some of the effects, but not all.

BEGIN COMBAT LOG

Alma attacks Singh with Level 3 Psi Blast for 4 points.

Singh resists Stun!

Singh is Disoriented!

Singh resists Confusion!

END COMBAT LOG

The damage done was negligible, but the *Disorient* debuff made the lich stumble once more. So much so in fact that he broke the primary rule of magical shields and kids in church. Do... not... touch... it.

The lich's hand only grazed the boundary of his magical barrier, but that was enough. The previously invisible shield popped like a soap bubble. That was all the opening Sion needed. He couldn't risk an imbued shot with Alma still flying over the lich's head, but he had already chosen the arrow he would shoot if given the chance. There were not many left in Richter's quiver, but the chaos seed had been saving this one for a special occasion.

The truesilver arrowhead glowed golden with a *Life Attack* enchantment. The tip glistened with Sun Lotus Poison. To Sion, time seemed to slow as he entered a perfect moment that contained only him, his weapon and his target. The arrow string thrummed as his arrow sailed through the air, catching the lich high in the chest!

Once more, the Mausoleum saved Singh's unlife. Even as the poison coursed through the lich's undead body, much of the damage was transferred to his minions. More skeletons and zombies dropped lifeless, and the pain helped him shake off the *Disorient* debuff. With a snarl, Singh pointed his staff at the Companions, prepared to destroy both them and the small dragonling. Richter had not hesitated either though. As soon as Alma had struck, he had sprinted forward. His stat-enhanced body had raced to close the distance to the Mage, but even he would not have been fast enough to bring Black Ice into range. That was why it was wonderful that it had never been his intention.

As Singh brought his staff down to fire a magical bolt that would vaporize the Companions, Richter locked eyes with his familiar. Time ceased to exist for the two of them. Not even the hint of a moment passed for everyone else, but for himself and his familiar, they lived out a lifetime. Her body turned to pure psychic energy and poured into him. Scales grew, fangs formed and talons extended from his hands. They both became more, but also became one.

To Singh and Sion, Richter transitioned in an instant. The lich's eyes began to widen in realization. From the chaos seed's memories, he knew Richter could trigger a powerful breath attack in his dragon form, but the lich had not survived centuries without being formidable. In an act that was as

much reflex as choice, Singh summoned a magical barrier.

It was not nearly as powerful as his previous defenses, and it only protected him on one side like a forged shield, but it was nearly an instant cast, something that was only possible thanks to an expensive Mage Talent. It had saved his unlife before and should let him weather at least the worst of Richter's attack. Singh turned sideways and bent down to ensure his entire body was hidden behind his barrier of eldritch magic and to present the smallest profile possible. Once more, his staff remained upright and to the side. The moment the chaos seed's flames were spent, he would summon the *artifact* to his hand and then he would render his enemies unto dust! Singh's plan would have worked if not for one small problem. The lich was not Richter's target.

Richter's Messeji form exhaled a powerful gout of near-invisible flame. The attack normally dealt fifty to one hundred points of damage per second, but that was increased by a factor of five when items were targeted. Even that might not have been enough, but Alma knew this attack was all or nothing. She used the last points from her absorbed Psi Crystals to increase the damage of Richter's fire to more than a thousand points per second. All their wrath and fury poured onto the emerald head of the lich's staff and the *artifact* began to burn.

In the first second, the entire staff began to blacken in the invisible

flame. In the next, the emerald centerpiece developed the faintest of cracks. The lich saw his mistake and summoned it to hand. Even then, he could not hide it completely behind his small shield. Instead, he began a counterattack.

He leveled the staff at Richter's dragon form and triggered a deadly beam of eldritch light, but the damage was already done. Another arrow fired by Sion broke apart on the lich's magic shield. Singh did not even notice. His attention was focused on a crack in the giant emerald, a flaw that had already widened to the length of a palm in the third second of Richter's flame attack. The eldritch magic Singh was trying to command leaked out of the breach in the powerful item. Singh howled in anger yet again!

To Richter's profound surprise, the lich then threw the priceless staff over the side of the walkway. Though he was an Enchanter, there were still many things he did not know about his Profession. One of those truths was that there were few things more dangerous than channeling massive amounts of power through a flawed item. He soon learned the danger though when the staff exploded before it had even cleared the side of the walkway.

As soon as the *artifact* had left his undead fingers, Singh had summoned another near-instant shield, but he was still too close to the epicenter of the detonation. The blast expanded outward in a sphere, crumpling his magic barrier like tissue paper. Singh did not even have time

to scream as the energy blasted him to the other side of the walkway. Richter was laid low as well. Though not as close, the destruction of the *artifact*-level item, coupled with the energy Singh had been channeling through it, was enough to blacken his scales and blind him in one eye. Even Sion was thrown backward, his unprotected head striking the metal ground of the Mausoleum's roof and rendering him senseless. The Core building continued to shake as more bolts of destructive power struck it, and the fate of kingdoms balanced on a knife's edge.

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Above them, the ball of magical energy continued to expand and indiscriminately fire magic in every direction. The Exile's power had struck the Mausoleum more than one hundred times and each attack had destroyed more of the Core building. Only a quarter of its durability remained. The magical beams had struck the undead and voidlings as well. The undead's army had been hit three times and thousands had been slain. One narrow bolt of Earth magic had also cut through the devastator skeleton's knee. Both it and the mauler had suffered during their fight, but that strike drove the undead to the ground. The void creature was now atop the *colossal* undead and was pulling it apart piece by piece. It slavered and howled in triumph, though its own body had also suffered grievous wounds.

Unknown to Richter, the battle had continued to rage in the Dungeon. Undead had poured in through the portal in waves. Each was repelled by the allied forces of the Mist Village and Hearth Tree, but at a high cost in lives

and resources. The arrows, mana and potions of the allied forces were not unlimited, and the red stone pillars of the Dungeon provided perfect bulwarks for the undead to hide behind.

It was during the fourth wave that several Rogue ghastrs climbed the stone walls of the Barbican and began to lay waste to the sprite archers. Ten meidon and wood sprites died before the last Rogue suffered the final death. The undead that had crested the battlements were defeated, but the damage was done. Without the defenders' imbued arrows attacking the invaders, the undead Mages had been able to complete a powerful spell that destroyed the portcullis.

The surviving allies atop the parapet continued to fire down at the melee undead that now stormed the outer courtyard, but they could not withstand the return fire of dozens of undead archers and casters that attacked without fear for their own unnatural lives. The sprites atop the walls fought to the very last, but the twenty men and women could not hold. As the last wounded sprites were dragged down the stairs into the inner room of the Barbican, the undead army began hacking at the wooden door that protected its last line of defense.

Only two things saved the allied forces from being overwhelmed in that moment. One, Roswan triggered one of the Barbican's hidden defenses. An eleven-inch-thick slab of marbled quartz dropped down to protect the

door to the inner room with a resounding *thud*. The falling stone crushed three skeletal Warriors beneath it. Even that defense would not last forever though.

The larger undead beasts Richter had seen in Nien's memory had come through the portal as well. It was not long before a four-ton scaled creature that stood ten feet at the shoulder ran at the stone slab and rammed it with its horns. While it bounced back from its first attack, it was not dazed in the slightest and just backed up to attack again. The third time it slammed into the stone, cracks appeared in the marbled quartz. The fifth blow made dinner plate-sized flakes of stone fall to the ground. The people of the tree and mist began to organize a retreat through the shimmering portal that led to the Entrance Chamber. They all knew the Barbican's defenses would not last more than minutes, and thought it better to continue the fight behind the village walls and moat than to be slaughtered in the Dungeon.

Through it all, Roswan stood silently in the corner, letting the fighters work, ready to do his part. If the inner room was breached, he would drop the second stone slab, protecting the portal to the Entrance Chamber. No one else, not even Richter, knew that the Barbican's last defense could only be triggered from inside the Room. The elf planned to rush to a Node and hopefully teleport to safety once it was done, but he knew he might not make it. That did not deter him. He was Roswan. He would see the job done.

The defenses of the Barbican saved lives, but there was a second factor that helped the allied forces survive. The undead did not come through the portal alone. Several hundred voidlings had been created by the void mauler's chains of dominance. Most remained with their new master to fight the devastator and the thousands of undead still with it, but dozens had poured into the Dungeon. They fought the undead, motivated not by any desire to preserve the living, but because they reviled everything that was not themselves so perfectly that there was no room for shades of hate. Both the living and dead were their enemies, and the voidlings would destroy or be destroyed. There were no other options. The implacable undead fought back, sometimes literally with tooth and nail, but also with magic and weaponry. The voidlings would fall occasionally, but always took several undead with them.

The Dungeon had become a symphony of pain and death, and through it all the throbbing heart of the barrow rejoiced. The energy flowing into it was so much more varied than anything it had ever tasted before. The Bloodstone Dungeon was barely sentient, and had a much harder time processing sensation with its Harbinger gone, but a memory of a dark-skinned man present at its transformation rose to its mind. If it had known what gratitude was, it would have felt it for this man. It would have thanked him for the cornucopia of rare pleasures and energies that it was now able to

feast upon.

The black creatures filled with rage were especially interesting. The Dungeon had to struggle with a concept until it came up with the word “taste,” but it felt the term to be right. They did not taste as good as the red blood bags, but the purity of their magic was helping it advance one of its Motivations. It wondered briefly at the significance of the Void magic that was beginning to be awakened in it, but such considerations were currently beyond its comprehension. Instead, it contented itself with the gifts it was being given.

Not only was life energy being released by the deaths of so many creatures, but items as well. The Dungeon had a much lower chance of learning and reproducing items gained in this way, as opposed to anything dropped in the Well of Offering, where it had a 100% retention rate. Still, it gained many interesting imprints of items, weapons and armor.

Even more fascinating to it were the bodies of the undead. By degrading those quickly, it learned the intricacies of their forms and natures in a way that only a Dungeon could. Far back in the evolution of the Labyrinth, it had developed the ability to understand the true essence of the lifeforms it consumed. The level of understanding put Richter’s *Analyze* skill to shame. Just as parents passed on traits to their children, Dungeons gained traits from the Labyrinth. Some were stronger and some weaker in various

traits; the Barrow of the Chaos Serpent was innately strong in its ability to understand its victims.

Ghasts, vampires, zombies, skeletons and other types of undead were absorbed and processed. The Dungeon learned about not only the structural composition of the undeads' bodies, but their strengths and weaknesses as well. The barrow also learned what the creatures had been like in life. Singh's army was comprised of dwarves, humans, orcs, ogres, naiads, centaurs, beastkin and many other sapient races. The Dungeon learned them all.

The beastkin were especially interesting as their forms were so very similar to the creatures the Dungeon could already spawn. It immediately tried to do so, but found that they were not "beast" enough to fit within the spectrum of monsters the barrow could make. If the Dungeon could have felt disappointed, it would not have done so for long.

In addition to the sapient beings that had been turned into undead slaves, there were animals and beasts in the lich's army. Mixed in with the Professional Warriors, Mages and Rogues were stone spiders, cave wargs, and hand-sized scorpions that injected acid strong enough to melt rock. After absorbing one, the Dungeon learned they were called albinid pincers. It learned to make these beasts and many more as they died inside of it.

One form in particular confused it. The bones of the skeleton were much harder and the minute structures that formed them seemed to have been replaced by rock. The creature had components that reminded the Dungeon of both beastkin and beast. It walked on two feet and held weapons like most of the small creatures releasing their energy, but the Dungeon was fairly sure it *could* make this creature... in time.

The battle continued and the Dungeon shot up in levels. Four, five, six and seven came and went as more undead and voidlings were destroyed. It gluttoned on the energy being released and it began to feel something strange. The Dungeon's awareness was too rudimentary to even consider the implications of what it was about to do, and even Scholars could not have said why the barrow did what came next. Perhaps it was merely fulfilling the dictates of Richter's Call of the Dungeon. Perhaps it was self-motivated to protect its Master. It was even possible that vestiges of the Bloodstone's consciousness felt... gratitude at the feast it was being offered, but whatever the reason, the Dungeon performed two actions to preserve the people of the mist and tree.

The Barrow of the Chaos Serpent had used its Blood nature many times. The Deeper magic manifested when the Dungeon grew monsters, absorbed spilled blood and performed several other instinctual actions. Until now, however, it had ignored and neglected an even greater reservoir of

Power, the Higher Energy of Chaos. It did not understand the Power. It had felt that the infinite possibilities of the roiling grey energy seemed as likely to hurt as help.

Now it turned its focus to that side of its nature like a baby examining its legs for the first time. On an instinctual level it reached within itself and felt the Chaos that dwelt there. The Dungeon did not try to force a specific outcome; such a thing went against the very nature of Chaos, and the barrow lacked the requisite cognition to even try. Instead, it searched deep within itself and, by feel alone, *twanged* a single string of infinite possibility. The exertion to reach that side of its nature exhausted the Dungeon's fledgling consciousness, and it sank into a pleased torpor as it continued to feed on both the people of the mist and tree and their enemies alike.

Though the Dungeon did not know it, its effort had made two small but vital changes. The first was that the gateway to the Mausoleum shifted slightly. Rather than running perpendicular to the sphere of destructive energy above the Core building, it now angled upward and faced it directly. That small change would shape the destiny of many.

The second effect was that a tendril of Chaos magic, as thin as a pine needle, snaked out of the walls and across the ceiling of the Dungeon. It stopped when it found a small chrysalis. The creature inside awakened from her magical slumber and flew through the portal. Her mindless instinct drove

her to find a strong creature to bond with. As the lich's staff exploded, she raced to the top of the Mausoleum. With every flap of her small wings, she could feel the essence of the one she sought growing closer.

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Master. Master! MASTER!

Richter came back to himself, blinking. He sat up with a wince. When he had formed the Messeji, his draconian body had been fully healed. That freedom from pain had been a profound relief. The staff's explosion had fixed that. It was a strange situation spitting with such sharp teeth, but the gobbet that shot out of his mouth was bloody. He looked around, his head still spinning. Why did it feel like he was falling?

Master! The walkway is collapsing!

That got through to him. His mind cleared and he realized that he wasn't falling, the walkway was! Accompanied by the horrible sound of shearing metal, the ground Richter was sitting on tilted even further downward. Before the staff exploded, the angle had only been about fifteen degrees. Now it was closer to forty and the end of the walkway was dropping further every second.

He stumbled to his feet. Even after losing consciousness, he had managed to keep Black Ice in his hand. Richter's eyes fell upon the body of the lich. Smoke was rising from what was left of Singh's body. The lich's left arm was missing and as well as some of his face. That entire side of the undead's body was charred. The once-powerful king of a soon-to-be extinct kingdom was laid low. Richter's hand tightened on the grip of his Named weapon and he stared at the Mage with actual hate in his heart. It still wasn't enough.

He took a step towards the undead caster, but then another bolt of energy hit the Mausoleum. The end of the walkway dropped another twenty feet and the angle of the dangling walkway increased from forty degrees to almost sixty. It also began to tip to the side. The lich's body slid somewhat before stopping and Richter had to struggle to keep his feet. None of that would have forestalled his vengeance, but something else happened that almost made his heart stop. He saw that Sion's unconscious body was sliding down and to the side, inching ever closer to the abyss.

In that split second of decision, Richter made a choice. The same choice he had made in the tunnels beneath Law so many months ago. He chose to preserve the life of a friend rather than ensure the death of an enemy. In a move he barely thought about, in under a second, Richter had spun Black Ice above his head and sheathed it. As he turned to sprint up the

collapsing walkway, another prompt appeared and was automatically minimized to be read later. The chaos seed did not notice. He had to save Sion!

The rumbling continued. Not just in the walkway, but through the entire Mausoleum as it lost structural integrity. Great rents could be seen in the Core building where the rays of destructive magic had struck it. Hundreds of undead had fallen into the abyss and more than half of the lich's army had been destroyed. The voidlings and Death creatures continued their battle, neither side concerned with their own preservation. They were true lessons in hate, creatures that would let the world collapse around them if only they could see their enemies die along with it.

High above on the roof, Richter used Cloud Running. His feet set down after each glide, but the jumps let him climb the falling ramp much faster than running alone. Sion continued to slip towards the edge, but Richter got to him in time. The back of the sprite's head had left a bloody smear across the metal ground as he'd slid. His friend breathed, but would not wake up even when Richter shook him. *Analyze* showed that Sion had less than one hundred life left.

In that moment, the chaos seed realized that the only thing that mattered was saving his best friend's life. The battle, his hatred of the lich... it was all less important than the man he trusted above all others. Richter

picked Sion up with one hand and left the lich to his fate. He started running with his comrade thrown over his shoulder. It was time to go home. He was almost to the gap in the wall when his body was surrounded by eldritch fire and his mind exploded in pain.

Richter fell down with a scream. Sion's body spilled out on the ground beside him. They had almost reached the opening in the wall of faces and, for a moment, he had thought it was all going to be alright. Now that he was closer to the end of the walkway, he'd been able to see through the rent in the metal wall and, for once, fate seemed to be on his side. The beam of energy that had wrecked the barrier had continued through it and burned into the trap floor as well. Most of the ground beyond the wall was just ruined metal. The traps had been destroyed! They would have made it to safety... if not for the lich.

The chaos seed felt his immobilized body being lifted into air on ropes of magic. When he was turned around, his draconian face was only inches from the undead *master's* green fire eyes. The furthest part of Singh's eye socket had been destroyed, but the ball of flame within it remained intact.

The lich's words almost dripped ichor, "You thought you would run to safety?" Singh's eyes burned into Richter's. "No," he pronounced with the finality of the grave. "There is no safety." His voice had become even more

unnatural after the injuries he'd suffered.

Neon green light began to surround Singh's remaining hand as it wove unfamiliar spellforms. Richter tried to struggle free, but he had no more control of his body than the last time he'd been under the lich's thrall. Sion still lay unconscious and bleeding on the ground. In desperation, he even tried to force a psychic battle with Singh, thinking that in his Messeji form he just might be strong enough. Though he met the lich's eyes however, Richter could not even force the mental bond. His mind ran into the barrier of the Mage's mental defenses and was stop cold.

All the chaos seed could do was watch as the lich enacted his vengeance. The gold light of poison had stopped spreading through the caster's body, and though he'd been hurt badly and his staff had been destroyed, the master still clung to his otherworldly life. Another beam of energy struck the fourth floor of the Mausoleum and the Core building groaned in response. The furious Mage did not stop. With a final guttural word of power, the eldritch light on his hand lengthened into a blade of fell magic.

"You thought your new body would protect you or give you the power to destroy my mind?" The fires in Singh's eyes burned brighter, and the next word was thick with hate and judgement, "No."

The lich swung his hand forward and the fell blade of eldritch Thought magic cut through Richter's body. It did not physically harm him. It did something much worse. The Messeji bond between him and Alma was severed and they were ripped apart. A pain worse than anything they had ever experienced permeated their minds, bodies and souls. Alma's essence left his body in a torrent of blue light and Richter transformed back into a human.

This was not the end of Singh's retribution. The lich cast a containment spell of pure eldritch Thought magic and a sphere of green appeared around Alma's essence. Not only did it keep her imprisoned, but it kept her body in an ethereal state of psychic energy. Alma was a creature born of Thought magic, but she was never meant to be incorporeal for an extended period. Singh watched her dispassionately as she began to take damage from being in a disembodied state for too long.

The sphere of wild magic above them expanded again.

This time, Richter could not even control his body enough to scream, but his pupils widened in unexpressed pain. Slowly, the lich turned his ruined face to regard him before speaking once more.

"You thought your ability to be reborn would protect you?" The fires in the lich's face burned brighter than ever before. "No!" Singh spat before

chanting once again.

Alma screamed inside of Richter's head as she was tortured inside of the containment sphere. Once again, all he could do was stare at Singh as the lich completed another spell. The chaos seed had never known hatred so intense in either of his lives. Something deep inside of him strained against chains that were weaker than they had ever been.

Singh stared back at him as the lich's hand was enveloped in green flames. Disgusting words of Power spilled from the undead's disfigured mouth and filled Richter's ears, until seconds later, when the caster slammed his burning hand onto the chaos seed's face. The magic took root in Richter's soul.

A prompt filled Richter's gaze unbidden.

*You are **CURSED!** The lich Singh has cursed you with the **Curse of Eternal Servitude!** If you die before this is removed, you shall not be resurrected. Your soul shall not pass on. You will serve the lich until he himself suffers the final death and, even then, you will be bound to this plane. You will wander as a mindless shade, hiding in the darkest corners of The Land, never to know peace or succor. You shall be damned!*

"You thought you would save your people?" Singh screamed into Richter's face. "No! You cannot even save this one!" The lich cast a spell

and eldritch light surrounded Sion's body; the sprite rose into the air. As the lich continued to vomit words of Power, rents opened in the sprite's armor, flesh and bone. Blood fell to the ground in wet splashes and Richter screamed inside of his own head. He had lost, and Sion was about to pay the price!

Then something unexpected happened. As was the case in many great tales, the fates of all were determined by the actions of a small and most unlikely creature. A bolt of Primal magic laced with Gravity struck the Mausoleum its death blow at the same moment that a *sakeru* Life pixie flying faster than the eye could track struck Singh in the face. It was not an attack. It was an attempt to bond with a powerful creature that was the opposite of her element. In time, the eldritch mage could have used her celestial nature to gain power beyond his wildest dreams. In that key moment, however, the lich lost control of all the magic he was employing.

Richter's paralysis vanished. Sion dropped to the ground screaming, his health dropping more with every moment. Alma was released from the containment spell, and her body reformed in an instant, but she dropped senseless to the ground. Only time would tell the full effect of the psychic wounds she had suffered. And Richter...

Richter unleashed all his rage on a Mage that was finally defenseless and within reach.

With a savage scream of rage and pain and the growl of a monster, he stood and unsheathed Black Ice. In the same motion, he swung his sword in a perfectly executed sword form, for the first time not even needing to think about the attack prior to executing it. Another prompt appeared and was minimized without his notice as the blade flew true. The edge of the Named weapon struck the side of Singh's neck and passed through with barely a pause. The lich's head flew free the instant after that.

The Life pixie child that had started to bond to the undead tumbled through the air as well. As she hit the ground, one of her delicate wings was crushed. The head bounced twice on the ground before tumbling out into the abyss. Once, Richter would have hesitated to strike with an innocent at risk. Once, he would have dove after the head in a vain attempt to save the child, but in that moment, witnessed by no Exile, god or man, Richter just grinned at the falling corpse of his enemy as it suffered the final death.

So ended the story of Singh the lich and a pixie child so young that she would never be named.

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Several things happened at once. The undead split into two broad factions, those that were mindless and those that were sapient. The voidlings continued to attack both sides indiscriminately, but the ghastrs, vampires, draughr and several other self-aware Death species looked around in astonishment. They were finally free after centuries of captivity. They had to keep fighting against both the mindless undead and the voidlings, but they fled the battlefield as quickly as they could.

The portal also began to flicker. The lich had invested it with a great deal of energy from the Mausoleum to keep it stable, but now that well had run dry. It would remain open for a while longer on the reserves it had, but it already had begun to shrink and soon it would vanish altogether.

More importantly, two prompts appeared in Richter's vision.

*Know This! The caster of your **Curse of Eternal Servitude** has been slain! His death has greatly weakened the curse but has not broken it. You may now be cleansed of it with the appropriate magic. If you cannot find such a spell, the Curse will fade in **7 days**. You are no longer at risk of becoming a servant. If you die before the curse is removed, however, you will not be reborn. You will be bound to this plane. You will wander as a mindless shade hiding in the darkest corners of The Land, never to know peace or succor. You shall be damned!*

Another fucking countdown. It was good news of a sort, but Richter was insanely tired of other people having power over his life. There wasn't the time to worry about it though. The next prompt changed everything.

*Know This! The **Mausoleum of Saginald** has been destroyed. All status effects it enacted are now suspended. All slaves held in its thrall are now freed.*

More prompts also appeared and were autominimized by Richter's settings. He wouldn't have cared about any of them in that moment though, even if he had known. Something vital, something that had been missing since he'd come through the portal, returned. He had full access to his magic once more and there was a life he needed to save!

The chaos seed wasted no time. Kneeling, he dual cast *Minor Slow*

Heal on Sion. It cost him nearly two hundred MPs and he almost lost control of the spell, but his will firmed and he finished the incantation. Golden light surrounded the sprite as Life energy poured into him. It would take sixty seconds for the over two hundred and fifty points of health to be fully restored, but Sion's color and breathing began to improve immediately. Richter's throat clenched when he used *Analyze* and realized his friend had only had twenty health left when he'd finished his spell.

Sion continued to bleed, and though dual casting *Weak Stabilize* helped with that, it did not stop the debuff altogether. Richter already knew Alma had plenty of life left thanks to her status icon, but after casting his two spells she still hadn't awoken. He picked up her small body and gently examined her while casting *Weak Slow Heal*, hoping it would wake her up. She remained limp in his hands. Her small breast rose and fell, but that was the only movement. A tear threatened to fall from his eye and his heart ached, but he could not afford weakness, not now.

Richter turned back to Sion and was relieved to see that his friend had regained consciousness. That feeling was wiped away when he saw the stark fear in the sprite's face. Sion was looking straight up. The chaos seed had intentionally not been looking at the giant ball of death hanging above their heads because he knew he had to heal his friend. He couldn't have done that while running, Sion never would have made it to the portal otherwise. Since

he couldn't stop the bolts of destructive magic from being fired, he'd just put it out of his head and focused on the issue at hand. That was when he realized something was different though. For the past ten seconds, there hadn't been any sounds of explosive bolts being fired from the sphere. In fact, the sounds of battle had diminished a great deal as well. With trepidation, Richter looked up.

The originally slowly-spinning sphere of eldritch magic had been twenty yards across. High above, it had seemed small. After the Exile had disrupted the mana flow, it had grown more every second until it was more than five times as large. It had seemed like a malignant sun that was gradually swallowing the world. As it had grown larger, the flashes of magic on its surface had grown more violent and more vivid. The bolts of destructive power had also come more frequently. Now though, it was beginning to shrink.

No more beams of wild magic were being fired out of it, but the swaths of color were more turbulent than ever. In the first few seconds it lost what looked like ten percent of its mass. As it continued to shrink, the battle of magics within it grew even brighter and its surface shifted faster and faster. A few moments after that, the shifts were occurring so frequently that it seemed like it was flashing. Dread filled Richter's heart as he realized what was happening. Whether the Exile had altered the flow of magic upon

Singh's death or the globe of Power had just reached critical mass, he didn't know. What he could see was that it was beginning to implode. He was no expert, but he only knew one thing that happened to explosive material after that.

Looking at Sion he bellowed, "MOVE!"

He yanked the sprite to his feet, but whatever Singh's last spell had done to his friend had not been healed with Richter's second-tier magic. After the first step, Sion coughed a cup's worth of blood over the front of his armor. On the second step, the sprite began to fall. Without missing a beat, Richter threw his arm under his friend, and they staggered over the ruined floor together. He cursed at not healing himself as well, but it would take precious seconds to cast either of his Life summoning spells. That was time he just didn't have.

Instead of worrying about what couldn't be, Richter ran, Sion held in one arm and Alma cradled in the other. Her neck bounced limply as he ran and the sprite continued to hobble and fall at his side. Above them, the globe continued to contract and draw together the opposing energies. Richter pulled Sion and sprinted as fast as he could, but it was nothing better than a shamle. At some point in the slow dash, the sprite's injuries proved to be too much for him. Sion became just dead weight on Richter's arm, slowing them down even more. His shoulder felt like it was slowly being torn from

its socket. Gritting his teeth, he kept moving.

Richter cursed himself for not casting *Weak Haste* on himself, but maybe it wouldn't have made a difference anyway. After all this, after everything he had been through, they couldn't die now! He couldn't let Singh's curse be the end of him. They had won. Against all odds, they had won. It couldn't end like this.

That determination made him press on, even though he was sure they would not reach the portal in time. Even though he was sure the explosion would be cataclysmic. Even though there was nowhere for them to hide. That was when he saw it.

Richter's eyes had fallen on the sarcophagus. The same one that had killed Caulder. He couldn't stop himself from looking at the skeleton that lay sprawled beside the stone coffin. Caulder's remains lay still now though. The eldritch light was gone and the remains no longer registered to his *Analyze* Talent. He hoped the sergeant's soul had found peace, but another rumble in the ground reminded him that there was no time for sentimentality.

His gaze snapped back to the crypt. Something was different about it, and it wasn't just the lack of eldritch light. He kept staring as he pulled Sion and Alma ever-closer to the portal, until his identify Talent triggered. For the second time in a day, he saw the platinum-colored prompt of an *artifact*!



You have
found:
**Sarcophagus
of Saginald**

Durability: 41,572/41,572

Item Class: Artifact

Quality: Masterwork

Weight: 245 kg

Traits: This powerful artifact once held the body of the Undead God Saginald. Any undead that dwells within this coffin will have their powers increased. How this will manifest can only be known in time.

Richter didn't give a wet crap about the traits of the sarcophagus or who Saginald was. The high durability of the *artifact* was the sweetest thing he'd ever read though! There was a chance. They had a chance. He just had to move faster!

The sphere of magical energy continued to shrink in on itself and began to vibrate. The Exile's vengeance was almost complete. Richter reached the coffin and carefully placed Alma inside. A strange keening filled the massive cavern and he couldn't help but look up. The sphere was only four feet across now. The noise was being created by the disturbance of magics playing across its surface. Richter didn't know if he had one minute or one second left, but he knew there wasn't much time.

He lay Sion inside the coffin as well. Richter prayed he wasn't willingly sealing the people he loved most inside of their own tomb. All that remained was the lid. It lay next to the *artifact*, where Caulder had pushed it

to the side. The lid had grooves that lined up with the top of the sarcophagus to hold it in place. It took every ounce of his Strength, but he managed to lift it and slide it on before climbing inside as well.

Once he was in, he pushed against the top, struggling to move the heavy lid into position. With a final heave, it blocked out all the light of the outside world. Richter grabbed Alma's still-limp form and cradled her to his chest. Trapped in darkness with his familiar and first Companion, Richter listened to the ragged sounds of his own breathing. His heart thudded in his chest and he wondered if he'd been wrong about the sphere. Maybe it was just disappearing. Maybe it wouldn't actually explo-

The world broke in half.

To Richter it sounded like the nine hordes of hell had come screaming for his blood. To every other creature in the cavern, it was the end of everything. In the blink of an eye, their world devolved into jagged ice, scorching fire, burning light and cursing dark. Debuffs of every type afflicted each undead and voidling a bare moment before they were wiped from existence. The mauler was partially protected by the negation magic of the void, but even that was overcome and it was sent howling into the abyss. Magic continued to play over its body, the power etching itself into the reptile's soul. The devastator skeleton, voidlings and remnants of the undead army lacked the Labyrinth boss's high level and resistances. They were

utterly consumed.

The blast flowed unhindered into the portal. At another angle, the gateway might have been destroyed, but instead it was perfectly positioned to channel the explosion. Raw destruction flooded the first floor of the Dungeon and obliterated every creature that it touched. The explosive power turned the marbled quartz walls of the Barbican into rubble and blew the doors of the inner room inward. A fine powder filled the air, making it hard to breathe and see. Every single invader was destroyed as well as two sprites that were killed by the collapse of the Barbican's defense. The Dungeon absorbed them all. It rose in levels once more and learned to create new monsters.

For Richter there was only heat, furious sound and then, the sensation of falling. The magical detonation stove the Mausoleum inward. In the space of a second, the three-hundred-foot building was crumpled like a beer can. The sarcophagus survived the blast but tumbled through the air, spinning on three axes. It landed with a solid thud and both Companions were rendered senseless yet again.

Richter came to only a minute later. He opened his eyes, completely confused. The absolute blackness was disorienting, but then his mind cleared enough to remember. The agony he was suffering was extremely helpful in that regard. It felt like... well, it felt like he'd been dropped from a great

height while hiding in a stone crypt. An image flashed through his mind of being buried alive under rubble. Pure animal panic bloomed in him as he suffered a terrible wave of claustrophobia. He reached up to the top of the coffin. His hands scrabbled to open it, but it wouldn't budge an inch. Visceral panic threatened to strangle him before he forced himself to calm down. He was the Lord of the Mist, and he had more to do.

The chaos seed took a deep, shuddering breath. Thinking was hard due to a *Concussion* debuff, but after three tries, he managed to cast *Weak Slow Heal* on himself. Breathing and thinking became slightly easier after that. The flash of light that came with the magic also gave him an orientation and he realized why he hadn't been able to open the coffin. It was lying on its side. When he had been pushing "up," he'd really been pressing on the artifact's side. Taking a deep breath, he positioned his hand on the actual lid, praying this would work. His fear surged again when he tried to slide it up and nothing happened. A second later though, he was able to breathe a sigh of relief when it slid downward.

The lid only moved enough to reveal half the opening, but it was more than enough. Richter climbed out and was greeted by darkness and silence. After having to tune out the sounds of battle for so long, the quiet was deafening. He put that out of his mind along with the fading panic about being buried alive. He was still breathing, he could still move and there was

still work to be done.

A moment later, he had accessed both Alma and Sion's status pages. Alma remained unconscious, but her stats were full. He contented himself with that. Sion was another matter. The sprite had lost another one hundred and twenty-eight health. More concerning was the fact that the sprite's *Bleeding* status had worsened to seven HP lost per second.

Now that his head wasn't as cloudy, he tried healing Sion. After several more attempts he was able to cast *Minor Slow Heal* and *Weak Stabilize* again. This time he also cast his two Life summonings, *Summon Weak Life Wisp* and *Summon Weak Gold Fox*. Both creatures phased into existence over the sarcophagus. Their glows lit up the area immediately outside of the coffin and they began pouring healing energy into the Companions. The wisp was only able to heal once, but it still increased Sion's health by one hundred points. The gold fox fired beams of healing magic several times before it dissipated.

In less than a minute, they were almost back to full health. Sion was still weak, but the Life magic had roused him. Part of the sprite's health bar was greyed out, showing that there were internal injuries that still needed to be fixed, but he would need a better healer than Richter to do it. The chaos seed's *weak* and *minor* spells just weren't up to the task. Despite that, both of them were more hale than they'd been since the beginning of the battle.

Seeing that Sion was stabilized, at least for the moment, Richter shook his head in wonder. Goddamn it was good to have Life magic again! For a second, he just stood in the blackness of the cavern and delighted in the fact that he was *almost* pain-free again. The ground they were standing on rumbled audibly as if to remind him that they still weren't safe. Richter took the reminder in appreciation. They needed to get home. He just hoped the portal was still there. He'd already tried communicating with both Yoshi and Hisako, but there had been no response.

He looked around him and found the portal in seconds. The fact that it was still open was the only good news. Richter cursed and began to cast *Far Light* as quickly as he could. Luminescent spheres shot from his hands in all directions. Some struck surfaces a few dozen yards away, but every single globe he shot above him disappeared. That could only mean one thing. The spell had a one-hundred-yard range. If the lights connected with something inside that radius, they would adhere. If they didn't though, they winked out of existence. It meant there was nothing above him. The explosion had completely destroyed the Mausoleum.

The lights that hit the ground revealed another desolate fact. The ground they were standing on was only a small island of stone. The blast hadn't just destroyed the Core building, it had destroyed the very bedrock upon which the Mausoleum had stood. His balls of light stuck to a few

surfaces past the edge of the pillar they stood on, so theirs wasn't the only pillar, but for all intents and purposes he was standing on an island in a sea of empty air. The four pillars he was able to see were sticking up out of the abyss like skyscrapers in an apocalyptic city.

From what he could see so far, there was no path to safety. To make matters worse, the ground was shaking beneath their feet. It was only luck that had made the sarcophagus land on a pillar and kept it from falling all the way to the bottom of the chasm. The quakes beneath his feet proved their luck would run out soon though. The only possible escape was the portal, but it had remained in the exact same spot in space where it had originally opened. A spot that was now several hundred feet above their heads.

Sion stood up beside him, holding his ribs in pain. He followed his friend's gaze and cursed in spritespeak, "Tell me that's not the portal." The look in Richter's eyes was answer enough.

Another, much stronger quake shook the ground beneath their feet. Both men almost fell. Sion looked him in the eyes and Richter could read the resignation in his friend's face. There was no way for them to reach the gateway. Even though they could see it, it might as well have been on another planet. They could both also track that it was growing smaller. Soon they would be trapped in this place of darkness until the pillar collapsed and plunged them to their deaths.

The shaking grew more violent. Looking at his friend, at the man who had stood by him in war and peace, Richter knew what he had to do. In that moment, every ounce of fear and uncertainty drained away. All that was left in its place was calm acceptance. The chaos seed discovered that there was a freedom in accepting one's fate. He had just two preparations to make first.

Richter forced a smile onto his face, "Don't worry, man. I've got a plan. I'll Cloud Run us up to the portal."

"What are you talking about?" Sion responded, still looking up at the gateway. "It's almost two hundred yards away! I watched you practicing back at the village. Every air jump you make takes more stamina and I know for a fact that you never got more than forty feet off the ground. You also nearly broke your neck when you fell. And that was without carrying armor or me." Sion shook his head, "I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I know we've gone as far as we can."

"Now who's being the gyoti?" Richter asked with a short laugh. "You *might* have a valid point, but when you saw me jumping before, I didn't have this!" The chaos seed held up the last preparation he'd made before coming through the portal, a gold band with a single red gem.

You have

Durability: 43/43

found:	Item Class: Scarce
Bracelet of	Quality: Superb
Home's	Weight: 0.2 kg
Heart	Traits: The gems on this bracelet are actually two halves of a whole. Expertly cut, the jewel is a <i>rare</i> drop from a silver wyvern. The last drop of its blood crystallized to embody the speed and grace of this aerial predator. That magic has been preserved. The wearer of this bracelet may leave one of the gems in any location they choose. When the magic of the bracelet is activated, the wearer will gain the ability of flight and be pulled at the maximum flying speed of a silver wyvern to the location of the other jewel. This is a one-use item which will be destroyed afterwards.

“Before we left, I put one of the gems in the Dungeon. If you wear the bracelet, it will pull you up and I’ll hold on. With it pulling us upward, I’ll be able to make up the difference with Cloud Running. We can do this! I can’t have anything on me though; I need to focus on my jumps. You have to hold Alma, and you should take my Bag of Holding as well. I can’t be encumbered.”

Sion looked at him, confused, “Why would I have to-”

“We don’t have time for this, man! The portal is closing.”

“What if the magic in the bracelet doesn’t know the portal is the shortest way home?” Sion shouted at him. “What if it tries to fly us the long way round and we get slammed into a wall?”

“Then we’re totally fucked. Stop bringing shit up!” Richter shouted back. The two friends glared at each other, tense and stressed, until they both started chuckling. With a soft grin, he put his hand on his friend’s shoulder, “This has to happen, man.”

Sion nodded his head and let out a long breath. Though he still looked uncertain, but he took the bracelet. While he slipped it on his wrist, Richter reached back into the sarcophagus to get Alma.

As the chaos seed looked at the *artifact*, his identification Talent triggered again and he realized just how close they had come to dying in the blast. Of the forty thousand points of durability the sarcophagus had originally, only five hundred remained. In all honesty, the outside of the sarcophagus looked beat to hell. He glanced around quickly, hoping that Caulder’s bones might have survived the blast as well, but they were nowhere to be found.

As he reached inside of the sarcophagus, he saw something else. For

the first time, he was able to really see the interior with light shining on it. He immediately noticed that a circular patch of stone on the bottom was a slightly different color than the rest. As he continued to look at it, his Pierce the Veil skill activated and it began to glow a soft, welcoming blue. Richter touched the spot and something wondrous occurred. That portion of stone grew transparent and a clockwork sphere leaking red and white light floated out of the hidden cubby.

*Know This! You have destroyed the **Mausoleum of Saginald** and may now claim its Core and Item*

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.
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Even knowing what was about to happen, a smile creased Richter's face. Every Core building seemed to require three components. A basic version of the building, a powerful item and a Magic Core. He realized now that the sarcophagus hadn't been just an *artifact* Singh had used, it had been one of the three components of the Mausoleum. Looking at the *mythic* item in his hands, he sighed. The sound was filled with both happiness and

sadness. Whatever came next, his village would grow stronger.

The Core went into his Bag of Holding and he gently picked up Alma. As he walked back to Sion, he looked at his beautiful familiar. He sent a prayer to any being that might be listening that she would wake soon. The ground continued to shake and off in the darkness he heard another pillar collapse and fall away. The quakes under his own feet did not dissipate this time. Looking high above, he saw that the portal was now less than ten feet across. There was no more time to waste.

He hurried over to Sion and handed Alma to him. The sprite carefully cradled the dragonling as Richter slipped his Bag of Holding over his friend's head.

"Are you ready?" Richter asked, putting his arms around his friend.

"Yes, but I still don't know why you're not wearing the bracelet and I'm not holding on to you."

Richter looked back at him with an unreadable expression before softly saying, "Let's do this, man. It's time to go home."

Still confused, Sion did what his friend asked. He activated the Bracelet of Home's Heart, but a red prompt appeared.

*The **Bracelet of Home's Heart** cannot be used with two people relying on its flight magic. Remove the second person and the magic will activate.*

The sprite's eyes widened in panic. What were they going to do? Sion started to speak, but looking at his friend's calm but sad expression, he finally read the truth in Richter's eyes. The chaos seed already knew.

He had just needed to touch Sion and have him trigger the magic, before he did what came next. Richter chose "Yes" on a black and gold prompt in his vision, and another window appeared in Sion's.

*Richter of the Mist Village has made you his **Heir**. Upon his final death, all Mastery and items he owns will become yours.*

Sion looked at his best friend in all the world and shouted, "What are you doing?"

Richter looked back with a faint smile. As he let go of his grip on both Sion and this life, he said, "I'm saving the fucking day, brother. That's what we do."

As soon as he let go, the bracelet's magic activated. Sion only had time to reach his one free arm out in a vain attempt to grab Richter before he shot up through the air. The sprite screamed, "Nooooo!" his eyes locked on his friend, until he rose too high and Richter was swallowed by the blackness. After that, the sprite was left with only the image of his brother's resigned smile.

Sion and Alma flew through the shrinking portal and arrived back in

the Dungeon. The blast of magic had destroyed almost every red stone pillar and had turned the floor of the barrow to scorched earth. He flew through the ruins of the barrow, hurtling towards the egg Room and the small red gem Richter had hidden within it. Just before stopping, his speed slowed to a gentle float with no negative effects and he alighted on the ground, as softly as a feather. The devastation around him did not matter to Sion at all. He just started running, faster than his wounded body could handle, as soon as his feet touched down. He had to get back to the portal! With Alma cradled in his arms, he ran back towards the shrinking gateway. His eyes were still locked on it when it shut forever, without a trace.

Sion stared at the empty air in disbelief. Blinking he softly said, “no”, before falling to his knees and screaming to the heavens, “No!”

Richter had watched his friend and familiar fly to safety with a calm joy. His village would continue. His friend would live, and he knew in his heart that Alma would fly again. As the portal winked out of existence, the ground continued to rumble under his feet. It only grew in strength as the entire tower prepared to drop into the abyss.

CHAPTER 108 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



Richter would have stood in that one spot, with the darkness only lit by the few spheres of *Far Light* that had stuck to the ground, but then he heard a familiar roar. His head swiveled to the side in disbelief. It couldn't be. It was the work of a moment to weave his hand in the spellform required to cast *Night Vision*. His vision became an overlay of greens and blacks. The small white spell balls burned in his vision, but they also let him see as easily across the immense cavern as if he was outside at noon. He had to search for a few seconds, but then he saw it. The mauler was clinging to the side of a nearby pillar of stone. It was driving its hardened talons into rock and had almost climbed to the top. One of its legs was missing below the knee, but its regen capability ensured that almost no blood was leaking out.

At first Richter didn't know how to feel, so he just studied it with clinical detachment. It looked different than before. The matte black of the void was gone, but there was still something weird about it that he just

couldn't place. *Analyze* filled in a lot of the blanks.

Name: Hellspawned Mauler

Disposition: Soul Malice (MORTAL

ENEMY)

The raw magic released by the Exile Rakshasha has changed the tovuut mauler into a hellish creature. No monster such as this has ever walked The Land. No longer able to draw on the high ambient magic of the Labyrinth, such a creature cannot survive long away from a hellscape. It must feed on the souls of other beings or it will be sucked back into an appropriate dimension. This creature is your **Mortal Enemy** and hates you above all else.

Level: ???

Health: 714/6981

Mana: 192/192

Stamina: 388/2377

Strength: ???

Agility: ???

Dexterity: ???

Constitution: ???

Endurance: ???

Intelligence: ???

Wisdom: ???

Charisma: ???

Luck: ???

He still couldn't read most of its stats, but he knew enough. The fucking thing was on its last legs. It was some sort of hell beast now but, as he gripped the hilt of Black Ice, he realized he had a demon of his own. It also didn't look like the mauler had seen him yet, so surprise was on his side. In that moment, Richter realized what he was feeling and it wasn't just the bulge in his pants! He would get to kill this thing before the end. A broad and sadistic smile grew on Richter's face as the ground continued to shake

under his feet. Excitement and a sense of purpose bloomed in his heart. If he was going to fall into darkness, he was going out Gandalf-style!

Backing up as much as he could, he sprinted forward. With a last powerful surge, he sailed off the edge of his pillar. It took three air jumps, but he made it to the top of the mauler's column. After dismissing his night vision, he cast *Darkvision*. Then he silently drew Black Ice and waited. Only a minute later, he heard the mauler drive its talons into the stone just beneath the lip of the drop off. A moment after that, it threw one hand over the top. That was what Richter had been waiting for. He looked over the side and got to see what shock looked like on his mortal enemy's face.

With a broad grin, Richter yelled, "Did I ever tell you about the Native American orgy?" The mauler quickly recovered from its surprise and began to roar in furious response. The chaos seed didn't give it any more time than that. He just swung his Named blade and shouted at the same time, "It was fucking intense!"

The powerful weapon cut straight through the mauler's fingers. Two of the talons remained embedded in the pillar's top. Blood shot out of the stumps and the former Labyrinth boss pulled its arm back in agonized reflex. That motion made its other hand rip free from the column's side as well. It began to topple back into space, only supported by the talons of its remaining leg that were driven into the stone. It strained to keep its leg straight, to grab

hold of the pillar once more, but Richter didn't give it a chance to save itself.

He could have watched it struggle. He could have stayed on the shaking pillar. He could have gained himself a few more precious minutes of safety by remaining atop the column of stone, but that was not who he was. When he had chosen to come to The Land, he'd been offered a life of adventure and danger, love and betrayal, power and wonder. Here, at the end of all things, he couldn't say that he hadn't had it all. In that moment, he accepted the truth. The true balm of his heart had never been peace. It had always been the chaos of conflict. That was why, in accordance to his truest self, he chose to fall.

As his mauler tipped back into the abyss, Richter jumped onto its body with his blade held high. His former Blood slave craned its neck to look up at him with a hate-filled eye, and the chaos seed grinned back in response. With a mad cackle, he plunged Black Ice through the plate-sized orb until his hand was buried in eye fluid. His blade had sought the mauler's brain once before and failed, but this time, it flew true. Black Ice penetrated the monster's grey matter and released its *Shatter* effect. Its brain was turned to slurry and pieces of its skull shot out of the back of its head. At long last, his mortal enemy's health fell to zero. Its body grew limp. Its leg came free of the pillar.

A prompt appeared in Richter's vision, but he minimized it without

reading. This was not a moment to be distracted. As the abyss finally claimed him, he laughed out loud in wild celebration. He laughed in remembrance of a life well lived, of strange love, random shoes and riding the wave all the way to the end. He laughed because he had lived every moment to the fullest, and most importantly, he'd done it his way. With one hand thrown high into the air, he rode the body of his vanquished foe into oblivion, all the while shouting, "Yaaaaaaahoooo!"

CHAPTER 109 – Day 150 – Kuborn 39, 0 AoC



Everything... HURT.

His neck hurt, his body hurt, his *teeth* hurt! How the fuck did his teeth hurt? Richter thought about it, but couldn't come up with a good reason. He remembered the fall, seeing the ground rushing up at him at an impossible speed, a wet sort of *crunch* and then... nothing. Richter groaned, a wave of pain coursing through his body. He had been pretty sure that becoming a “mindless shade,” or whatever the curse was going to do to him, would suck, but he hadn’t expected his damn *teeth* to hurt! Was this why undead were such assholes all the time? He shook his head and sighed heavily.

That was when it connected. He still wasn’t exactly sure what a shade was, but he was pretty sure he wouldn’t be sighing and breathing heavily if he was one. His mind began to clear, and he realized his recent thoughts were the equivalent of mindless babble. He also realized that,

against all odds, he wasn't dead. He was just beat all to hell.

How he was alive he had no idea, but pain and all, he'd take it. Richter slowly became more aware of his body. Absently, he thought about how it just *couldn't* be good for him to get knocked out like, four times in an hour. He shifted slightly and a fresh wave of agony swept through him. Lying still again, he waited for it to pass. He also realized that one of his initial thoughts had been spot on. EVERYTHING hurt!

He swallowed hard, his throat dry as sand. Without thinking about it, he reached for his Bag of Holding to get a water skin. His hand only found what felt like his own torn clothes. His brow wrinkled in confusion. Where was his armor? Had he been teleported or something? His *Darkvision* spell had elapsed, so at least twenty minutes had passed, but he had no other frame of reference.

One thing he knew was that he was tired of not having answers. He was also tired of feeling like a taint in a garbage disposal, so he cast *Minor Slow Heal*. The healing energy flooded his body and took away the worst of the pain. The flash of magical light also showed that he was in a small white dome with no exit. It wasn't large enough for him to stand up in, and he could see cracks running through it. Casting *Simple Light* let him look around more thoroughly, but didn't reveal anything else.

With nothing else to go on, he accessed his prompts. He'd gained an insane amount of notifications during the battle, but he started at the end. The words on that single notification both solved a mystery and let him know how he was still alive.

*Know This! Using the scales of a Unique creature gave a powerful bonus to your armor called **Shell**. This unique property activated at the moment of your imminent death. In the case of impending catastrophic damage, the **Shell** Material Bonus of your skeeling armor transformed your armor into a dome with a defense equal to your armor's durability. Activating the Shell bonus has destroyed your armor. The shell will only last for one hour, but you can destroy sections of it beforehand. Be careful while you do so, as breaking one section may compromise the entire shell.*

So that's what "Shell" meant, Richter thought. When he'd examined the skeeling armor he'd assumed it was something powerful, seeing as how it came from a unique creature, but he hadn't expected his armor to turn into a mini-fort! The fact that he was now left without any defenses wasn't the best, but then again, if the dome hadn't deployed he'd be a mindless shade, so he really wasn't complaining. His heart thrilled as he realized what all this meant. He'd been given a second chance.

He just had to survive seven days. If he did that, even if he was killed right after, he had a chance of respawning back in his village. That also

assumed that he had another life to spend, but he'd just killed a level ninety-two hell beast and survived a fall to the bottom of the world! He could do anything!

When he'd seen Sion disappear, Richter had already accepted the fact that he was going to die. It had seemed like a fair trade for saving his friends and his village. Now though, after surrendering himself to the jaws of death, death had spit him back out! True, he was buried who-the-hell-knew-how-far underground, he didn't have any armor, and Black Ice was nowhere to be found, but he was alive. Richter grinned fiercely. He planned to stay that way. He looked around the shell dome. It was time to get back to work.

The chaos seed placed a hand on the top of the dome and wondered how he was supposed to break out. To his surprise, the entire dome turned translucent at his touch. What he saw made him curse. The dome was also completely buried under rubble. His claustrophobia began to surge again, but he forced himself to be calm. The prompt had said the shell would only last an hour. All he knew for sure was that twenty minutes of that was already gone. He had to work this problem and he had to work it now.

Richter began to go over every inch of the dome. It took ten minutes, but he finally found a reason for hope, though not much of one. Near the ground, there was one spot that was not covered in rock. It was only three feet across and a foot and a half high, but it extended outward. It was a

narrow tunnel. He had no idea where it led, but he did know it was his only chance.

Richter placed his hand on the dome and willed that one spot, and only that spot, to break. The section of dome in front of the tunnel began to crumble. A few seconds later, there was a small hole in the dome. The air rushing in through the opening was dry and had a strange smell, something that was familiar but that he couldn't place. Richter's hand wove in a spellform and he cast *Far Light*. A ball of white luminescence shot down the tunnel and he breathed a heavy sigh of relief. It struck a wall after fifty or so yards and he could see that the opening in the rock led to a larger chamber.

Looking around the small dome a final time, he didn't see anything else of use so he started crawling. If his dislike of confined spaces had surged in the dome, it supernovaed in the tunnel. His already-torn clothes snagged and ripped on the rock. Each inch forward made pebbles and dust fall from the unstable ceiling. The tunnel grew narrower and began to squeeze his shoulders. Richter's breath came heavier and faster as panic filled his mind and heart. At some point, he began scrambling forward like an animal in a trap, convinced he would be crushed at any moment. When he finally emerged into the next chamber, he still struggled forward another foot before he realized that his head had cleared the tunnel.

Once he was fully out, he just lay back against a wall of solid stone,

his breath coming in deep gasps. The solidity and firmness of the rock wall helped him focus and calm down. A minute later, he felt up to taking stock of his surroundings. He was in a small cave made of light brown stone. The walls were pockmarked and rough. There was barely enough room to stand up, and the only two exits were another tunnel that led downward at a steep angle and the way back.

Richter stared bleakly at the dark opening, but he knew he couldn't wait long. If he let himself start thinking about the weight of all the rock above him, about being buried alive or being crushed, then he'd never have the nerve to leave. If he had still had access to food and water, he might have just stayed in that small cave for seven days until the curse faded away. After that he'd have happily rolled the dice on being reborn if it meant that he didn't have to keep squeezing through corridors that had never been meant to accommodate men. He couldn't wait here though. It was a death sentence, and it would be his final death.

After healing his small scrapes and bruises, he cast *Far Light* down the new tunnel and started crawling again. This time, the passageway was sinuous and he could never see more than five yards in front of him. After each turn, he thought about how if this tunnel led nowhere not only would he be out of options, but he might be stuck, unable to back up. Fear threatened to overwhelm him, but he pushed it down and kept crawling. One hand went

forward, the other followed it and with a heave, he pulled his body along. Left hand, right hand, heave. Left hand, right hand, *heave!* It became his mantra as he crawled through the bowels of The Land. All the while, the tunnel angled deeper. Every inch forward was an inch further from home. He continually pushed that thought away and focused on the one thing he could control. Left hand, right hand, *heave!*

It wasn't long before he realized that familiar smell was getting stronger. It was like rotten garbage and ammonia. He still couldn't place it, but he knew he'd smelled it before. He kept going. Richter wasn't sure if hours or just minutes had passed, but finally, at long last, the tunnel began to widen. Even better, the ball of *Far Light* did not strike a nearby wall, it shot forward one hundred yards before dissipating. He'd found a larger cavern!

At this point, his throat felt like sandpaper. He needed water and he needed food. He would have needed a bathroom, but that particular problem had solved itself halfway through the tunnel. The solution hadn't helped his mood or the smell. Still, he felt nothing but pure joy as he scrambled to the end of the passage. There was a short drop but he managed it easily. The smell was much stronger now. That was when he heard it. A skittering sound, like a hundred sharp legs on rock.

That sound, and the image it conjured, made him remember. One summer, he had visited his aunt in the country. The very first night he'd

stomped on a centipede as it ran across the floor. The dead insect's body had filled the room with a horrible scent. A smell like rotting garbage and ammonia. In a panic, Richter cast *Night Vision* and began casting *Far Light* in every direction.

The first thing he saw were bones of all sizes strewn across the cavern floor. Then he saw what was making the noise. A centipede was flowing towards him, but it was no mere bug. Its body was a foot in diameter and it was at least thirty feet long. Its carapace shone black in the light of his spells, and its eyes glowed in his night vision. When it saw him look right at it, the giant bug bared a mouth full of needle-sharp teeth at him. Large pincers framed its face, and drops of saliva dripped down to *hiss* against the rock. Through a doorway at the back of the cavern, he saw more glowing eyes looking at him.

It continued to flow towards him and he used *Analyze*.

Name: Ichorpede

Disposition: Ravenous Hate

Ichorpedes are large insects that hunt in packs. Their acidic spit dissolves the internal organs of their victims. They then drink their prey using their needlelike teeth.

*Special Attack: **Acidic Spit** – Can spit a caustic substance short distances.*

Level: 31

Health: 1322/1322

Mana: 14

Stamina: 857/857

Strength: 35

Agility: 38

Dexterity: 39

Constitution: 132

Endurance: 85

Intelligence: 1

Wisdom: 3

Luck: 10

Richter cursed. He was in a lair! Not only that, he'd finally found out where the high-level monsters were hiding. The ichorpede skittered towards him faster now, clacking its pincers together in anticipation. It was only fifty yards away. The chaos seed ran to the left and grabbed the only weapon available, a gnawed leg bone. He had no idea what kind of creature had left it behind, but it was as big as a Louisville Slugger. Part of him realized that this bone was only here because the ichorpedes had been able to bring down such a large beast. A bigger part of him told that part to shut the fuck up! It was game time.

As the giant insect closed the distance, Richter began to prepare. *Minor Chitin Carapace* thickened his skin and increased his natural armor by +3. *Weak Haste* boosted his speed and *Weak Mirror Image* made two copies of himself. He summoned a saproling and spider, evolving them both into stronger versions. With the ichorpede only ten yards away, he dismissed his night vision, then cast *Grease* and *Weak Flame* in quick succession. The entire circle of brown gravy sludge lit up, enveloping the giant insect in fire.

It reared back with a hiss of rage, its head towering five feet above

him. Richter was raising his makeshift bone club to strike when he heard a voice that made his mouth drop open in shock. Floating out of the darkness came a small winged creature only a single foot in height. His body was ash grey and black bat wings flapped behind him. The expression on his face was both bored and annoyed. When Xuetrix spoke again, his tone was a perfect match.

“I said stop playing with those bugs, human. You made me a Vow, and I’m here to collect.”

~ The Story Continues ~

Thank You

Thank you so much for joining me in The Land once more!

This book was a true labor of love. I spent a year of my life on it. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I did writing it!

There are many more stories to come and I hope you continue on the journey with me.

The fact that I can share this story with awesome people makes all the thousands of hours spent creating it worthwhile lol.

As always, Peace, Love, and the Perfect Margarita!

Aleron

Good people of the Mist Village, **PLEASE** leave a review.

I am an independent author, and you are my greatest strength

Even leaving some stars would be enough.

Thank you so much again!

I am honored to share my world with you.

If you want to stay connected and know when my next work comes out, the BEST way is by [NEWSLETTER](#) and my [AUTHOR PAGE](#).

Unfortunately, Amazon doesn't update you when new works come out some of the time, but if sign up for the newsletter or like my author page, you'll know immediately.

You also get a secret FREE Comic for The Land when you sign up! Shhh, don't tell anyone!

INDEX and Epilogue

I will be continually updating the index this time so save this [LINK](#) lol!

There is also an Epilogue that you can only find by following the link!

How to contact Aleron!

1) [AUTHOR PAGE](#):

Join me for almost weekly FB lives convos, giveaways and lots of laughs
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It has a list of ALL the LitRPG out there, awesome t-shirts and signed books, my blog and just all around awesomeness!

3) [PATREON](#): For sneak previews of upcoming books and seeing new artwork first, please join my patreon. You can even be written into one of my books! www.patreon.com/AleronKong

4) [FORUM](#): 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! Forum.litrpg.com

5) [NEWSLETTER](#): 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! eepurl.com/cns1UH

6) [YOUTUBE](#): Me and my friends 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)
<http://www.youtube.com/c/LitRPG>

7) [STREET TEAM](#): 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!
tinyurl.com/LitRPGStreetTeam

8) [FACEBOOK GROUP](#): Join the largest LitRPG community on the

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GUILD MEMBER HONORABLE MENTION

I would like to give a special thanks to everyone who supports me on my [Patreon Page](#)! Specifically, I would like to thank:

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Thank you ALL for helping me make this dream a reality!!!

