

Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author

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THE LAND: FOUNDING

CHAOS SEEDS: BOOK 1
A LITRPG SAGA

The Land: Founding

By

Dr. Aleron Kong



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

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The Dark Court



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

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

to their prison was the world simply called “The Land.” Despite having vast powers, no being had been able to escape the pocket dimension.

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

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

The Earth was a world almost completely devoid of magic. They had no gods to tell them what they should and should not do. It had created a population who committed atrocities on par with the most heinous of the Dark Court’s residents. What truly made Earth unique however, was that every human was born with a small seed of Chaos in their souls.

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

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

Ultimately, the people of Earth found a magic of their own, called science. Their faith in science replaced older faiths which had warned of beings like the Prince. Their belief in science had even caused them to lose faith in the existence of the soul! He could not help but chuckle as paradoxically the amount of souls he captured increased. Who wouldn't accept wealth and power in exchange for something they didn't even think existed?

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

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

popular and pervasive game on Earth. Millions played every day! They became the orc shaman that was powerful in a way that the tax accountant playing him in “real life” never was, or the sexy elf maiden who finally found that attention she craved, but no longer received as an aging housewife.

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

PROLOGUE



EARTH, North America, 2037

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

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

The rest of the party watched safely from behind a grove of trees several hundred yards away, nearly invisible in the dark. They would not have been able to see anything, but Jewel had cast the spell Shared Vision to let the rest of them see through Silk’s eyes.

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

“He’s not wrong Silk,” said Loki. “It has taken us forever to first find this castle, then fight through the Wilds, and finally break through the defenses to allow you a small window of time to get in! No one on the forums has even heard of the Castle of Transition! The loot we could get from this place will probably be artifact!”

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

“You’re a dick, Silk!” said Daliah.

A low chuckle came over the group chat as Silk made his way down the stairs to the lower levels, “That’s not what you said the other n-” The rest of the comment was lost to everyone as Daliah sent a psychic pulse through the spell connection. It was the mental equivalent of stubbing your toe in the middle of the night on the way to the bathroom, minor but insanely irritating.

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

Silk, for his part, stopped the chatter and continued down the dark hallway he found himself in. There were no torches or other light, and if not for his Sense of the Bat skill that Rogues only found upon reaching the lofty level of 130, then he would have been knocking into walls. Luckily their entire party was ranked in the top 100 groups in The Land, so none of them were noobs.

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

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

As Silk made his way down a fifth spiral staircase, green light came from the bottom, and the entire party held their breath in anticipation. Months of work were hopefully about to pay off. He stepped into a round room, and they saw the source of the light. It was coming from an arch of black crystal. In the arch was a rippling Dartmouth green energy field. Looking at it was almost like staring straight down into a deep and limitless ocean on a stormy day. In front of the arch was a short column with the indentation of a hand print on top. In the rest of the room there was... nothing else.

"Are you effing kidding me? Where is the loot," Crush shouted. The rest of the group kept quiet, but all were sharing the same disappointment.

"Maybe it's back up top," Jewel said. "Down another corridor?"

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

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

“Maybe get down tonight,” Crush finished, light chuckles coming over the chat line.

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

“Was that you Daliah? I don’t know why I keep expecting you to be smart just because you’re psychic! What should I do Loki?”

“Uh... touch it,” he replied.

“Thanks oh fearless leader,” Silk exclaimed. “You’re about as useful as a swiss cheese condom.”

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

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

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

“Uhhh, yeah.”

The voice spoke again. “Do you embrace a life of adventure and danger, love and betrayal, power and wonder?”

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

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

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

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

The world flashed white and...

CHAPTER 1



James covered his eyes against the sunlight that seemed determined to drive ice picks (naw, I'm better than that... fire picks? yeah, much better he thought sleepily). Yes! Fire picks through his eyes just because he had slept in! It was Saturday wasn't it? He was having trouble remembering the night before. Reaching down, he tried to pull the covers over his head, except he couldn't find them. In fact, as his hand fell back to his mattress everything felt remarkably, well... grassy! Also his pillow felt surprisingly like a rock jabbing into his back!

Showing bravery on par with assaulting a horde of giants, or talking to a really hot chick sitting at the bar, he opened his eyes and took in his surroundings. He was in a small glen studded with wild flowers and colorful plants. At his back was a large shelf of stone, and beyond it were the foot hills of mountains rising in the distance. The trees in front of him formed the other boundary of the glen. They rose tall and majestic. The scent of pines mingled

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

“What the hell!!!”

He sat upright as quickly as he could, not at all helping the headache that blazed in intensity at his swift movement. Looking down, he imagined it might have something to do with the curved rock that had been under his head, and the tender lump he felt as his fingers searched his scalp. As he took in his surroundings he was interrupted by a slightly off key, and resigned sounding voice, that spoke from just over his left shoulder.

“About time you woke up!”

Turning his head, slower this time, he saw the small form of an imp lazily flapping its wings as it hovered three feet off the ground! It had gray dusky skin, and pitch black, bat like wings perched on its back. Its body was humanoid, if only one foot tall. James stared at it in fascination. The VR module had never produced a creature so lifelike and unique before. Standing up, he slowly walked closer examining it in wonder until he was only an inch away. Which was the moment right before it kicked him in the eye.

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

“Look,” it said. “I’m here to help you and even if I wasn’t, it would take a lot more than a friggin noob to take me out. Now if you don’t want me here, I

can always leave.” It turned its back as it spoke, and started to gain altitude with a faster flap of its wings.

“No wait!” James said quickly. “I just don’t know what’s going on. Last thing I remember, I was in this castle, and then there was just a light, and now I’m here. And who are you calling a noob?!”

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

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

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

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

“The Land is bigger than the world you came from. You are one of the first of your people to be brought to The Land, and you were lucky enough to

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

"Yeah, it's near the Kingdom of Yves. Supposed to be a section of land with a crazy amount of rivers crisscrossing through it. As far as I know the patch to travel here wasn't released yet though."

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

The wasp immediately flew at James with its stinger extended as it curled its body. He quickly rolled to the side hearing and feeling a buzzing pass just by his ear. He tried to activate the HIDE action of his character Silk. The wasp upon missing with its first pass, immediately turned around and flew at him again. It clearly still saw him. This time the stinger punctured his left bicep. Red hot agony seared through his body as he swatted the wasp away, and it flew back into the air.

That pain was worse than anything he had every felt! What the hell was going on? The pain dampeners were not supposed to allow ANYTHING to hurt that much, let alone just the sting of a wasp on steroids! He picked up a rock with his right hand and activated True Aim, throwing it at the wasp. It easily dodged to the side though, the rock missing and accomplishing nothing. That was not supposed to happen, he thought. At his high skill level, there was less than a 1% chance of a projectile missing when he activated True Aim.

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

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

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

“WTF?!?”

“Well I hope you’ve learned more than that.”

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

“I already told you noob, you’re not your character. I told you twice! You are not a level 167 thief. Those classes don’t exist the way they did in the game. It requires a lot for you to qualify for a Profession, and you are nowhere NEAR that powerful yet. Don’t worry about it. Right now you are just some guy with two wasp stings in his arms, drooling on the moss. You have been sent to The Land from your world. You are really here! Not... your... character. Check out your status page.”

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

“Will it,” the imp replied simply.

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

Name: ???

Age: 24

Level: 1, 0%

Health: 100 Mana: 100 Stamina: 100

Strength: 10

Agility: 10

Dexterity: 10

Constitution: 10

Endurance: 10

Intelligence: 10

Wisdom: 10

Charisma: 10

Luck: 10

Abilities:

Limitless

Gift of Tongues

Skills:

None

Marks:

None

Resistances:

None

Race: Human (Chaos Seed)

Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”

Alignment: Neutral

Language: All

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shaking his head at the imp's ridiculous attitude, James replied, "Abilities are things you are born with or are given to you, skills can be learned. But I don't know what Marks are."

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

James examined his two abilities more closely.

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

GIFT OF TONGUES – you can speak and understand any language. You cannot speak to lower lifeforms or higher beings.

He related these to the imp whose face took on a look of surprise.

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

"No," he replied. "What did it mean?"

"Don't worry about it," the imp said with a smirk. "Your language ability will definitely be useful, but what's truly interesting is your other ability. Every creature born has a predisposition to being good at some things and bad at others. You might be a natural dancer so you have an 80% chance to

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

“But not you,” James asked.

“I was well paid to advise you. Trust me when I say that you’re lucky to have me. For an eternal being like myself, if I can’t be trusted to do a job, I don’t get many more.”

“Fair enough,” James said. He was still trying to breathe through the pain, and it was starting to make focusing on the conversation more difficult.

“Now, I’m sure by that pained expression on your face, you’ve realized that your health is not restoring. Lower health means more pain, and total loss of health will cause death of course. Low mana makes it harder to think and low stamina makes you sluggish. While magic and stamina will replenish over time, your health will not without prolonged rest or healing magic. As a Chaos Seed you will heal faster than others, wounds improving over hours rather than days, but still it will take time without help. As so,” the imp waved its hand and shadowy tendrils extended to touch James’ arms finally providing relief to the burning ache of his arms.

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

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

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

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

James smiled and looked at Xuetrix.

“My name is Richter.”

CHAPTER 2



“What’s a Chaos Seed,” Richter asked looking at his race.

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

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

treat those you encounter. You never know when the actions of today will impact the outcome of tomorrow.”

“Thank you Xuetrrix, I really owe you,” Richter said, extending his hand.

“What?” Xuetrrix said looking confused.

“I said I owe you.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Richter said with some exasperation.

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

A notification popped into Richter’s view

You have agreed to do Xuetrrix a favor. Failure to do so when asked will cause a decrease in your reputation with all beings, and other unknown consequences. Keep in mind, your word means everything!

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

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

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

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

You have received: Simple short bow. Damage 8-13. Durability 15/15. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 4.1 kg

You have received: Basic arrows with quiver. Quantity x10. Damage 3-5. Durability 2/2. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 1.1 kg.

You have received: Minor ring of healing. Will heal 30 health on wearer. Cool down 10 minutes. Can be used twice per day. Durability 8/8. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 0.1 kg

You have received: Dull bronze knife. Damage 2-4. Durability 20/20. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 2.0 kg

Slipping the ring on his finger and the quiver over his shoulder, he finally took in his surroundings and attire. He was wearing a sleeveless tunic and rough spun brown pants. On his feet were dark tan moccasins. He actually might be extremely stylish on Rodeo drive as he remembered hearing something about the “peasant” look making a comeback. Only thing missing was... Yup! Richter definitely needed to be the first person to invent both cotton and boxer briefs in this world. Whatever ‘roughspun’ was, it was definitely NOT the fabric of his life!

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

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

mom.

Shaking his head, Richter thought, What is with these messages? Seeing nothing else that could be of use he turned to leave the glade, but stopped as he was thirsty. Going over to the pool he paused as he saw his reflection in the still water. A man's face stared back at him. The expression was curious and kind. He had chestnut colored skin, and hazel eyes. His hair was cut short and was a mop of black curls close to his head. It looked like his old face, but leaner and more rugged. It was a visage he could live with.

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

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

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

Score! Let's get this going!

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

Leaving the glen, he felt a slight tingling. After walking through the trees for several yards, he looked back and saw what appeared to be only a stand of trees next to a cliff face. No one would be finding the glade without help. For some reason, knowing that his starting point in the world was hidden away brought him a sense of security. He realized then that finding it himself might

be a problem later. Losing something as clutch as that Pool of Clarity would be a bone head move of epic proportions. He spent about half an hour rolling medium-small rocks to the base of trees. They would look innocuous enough individually, but taking a larger view, they formed a rough line toward the glen.

The forest seemed old. The trees grew massive, hundreds of feet into the air. There was large spacing between the large trunks, but the floor of the forest was littered with detritus from fallen branches and thick undergrowth. The air was filled with the song of birds that filled the branches above his head. The sun filtered through the leaves, but the canopy was thick enough that its position could not be clearly pinpointed. Walking forward he began to hunt. He was already a bit hungry. After only a short time, he heard a faint snuffling up ahead of him. Moving forward slowly he looked over a dip in the forest floor. A red fox was rooting through the leaves, hunting for some morsel or other. He slowly nocked an arrow making sure to avoid any extra noise. He paused a moment with the string taut as he exhaled, then released! The arrow flew through the air, and hit the fox in its side. It let loose a high pitched squeal and attempted to run. Richter quickly nocked another arrow and let fly. It fell a foot short!

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

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 1 in Archery.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 1 in Small Blades.

Red Fox (Lvl 1) has died. You receive 8(+2) experience.

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

Chuckling to himself he retrieved his arrow, and then picked up the fox by the tail for later as well as his missed arrow. He kept moving forward. Over the next few hours of walking through the forest he killed several more foxes and more than a few rabbits. He collected them until:

TRING!

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3



Upon waking, he quickly obtained his 25% exp bonus from the Pool and left the glade. He decided not to place the points of his new level in any one area until he knew more about the world around him. He decided he would follow a river that he had crossed yesterday. His stomach rumbling he wished he could have cooked the foxes that he had killed, but without the ability to make a fire he had simply tossed the carcasses a small distance from the glen for the local wildlife to consume. His hunger had not gotten to the point of eating raw meat. Getting the trots from some weird alien bacterial infection was NOT on his to-do list. He had left the pelts to dry on a rock in the glade in full view of sunlight.

Making his way to the river, he quickly started walking upriver. It wasn't overly large at this point only about two dozen yards across. After about half an hour of walking, he found a bush with large bluish berries. Hunger

outweighing caution, he took a handful, and placed them in his mouth. Upon swallowing he received the notification.

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

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

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

"Get ready."

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

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

"I know what we need to do!"

"Quit arguing," a third voice said sternly.

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

“Why did he stop walking?”

“How should I know?”

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

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

“Shut up! Should we just attack him?”

“Yeah, let’s attack!”

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

Suddenly all was quiet.

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

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

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

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

The voice came from the bush directly in front of him. As he focused, it seemed that the air blurred in front of him, and the leaves became green

clothing for a small man. He stood three and a half feet tall. He had an almost childlike smoothness to his olive skin. The features were Asian in appearance, and the eyes had no whites. They reminded Richter of an owl's eyes, all bright color and pupil. What really captivated his attention however, was the fully drawn bow pointing at his face.

"He can't understand us, let's just kill him and be done with it," Richter heard from behind him.

"No! I can understand you! I'm sorry if I trespassed into your territory. I'm new to this world, and I'm just trying to survive!"

The arrow still pointed at Richter's face, the creature in front of him said, "We have never found a human that understood us before." Silence reigned for a short while. "We will take him to the Hearth Mother." Staring Richter in the eye, the small man lowered his voice menacingly (at least Richter thought it was supposed to be menacing, hard to tell since it all sounded like bird song). "Don't think we can't hurt you. We may be smaller than you, but believe me we know how to defend ourselves. Show him!"

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

"That was only one arrow," the small man warned menacingly, "and you will never see the next one coming!"

"I understand," Richter said to the Napoleonic figure in front of him. "You're in charge."

"Don't forget it, human. Now turn around and keep walking."

Richter continued moving forward along the bank. The only conversation being the near constant bickering of the unseen pair in front of him. Looking back he could still make out the form of the small creature behind, bow no longer drawn but arrow still nocked.

After several hours of walking, there was a break in the forest canopy, and the sun was seen well more than halfway across the sky. The trees suddenly parted to reveal a large meadow with golden waist high grass. A humongous oak was situated in the middle. The tree was easily the size of a forty story apartment building, massively dwarfing all other trees in the forest. The river continued along several hundred yards to the right of the golden meadow. The river Richter had initially been following had apparently been only a side channel. It had joined another larger branch which they had continued to follow upstream. Though the river was not far away, enough trees had been in the way that he hadn't been able to see the meadow or huge tree in the middle until he was almost on top of them.

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

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

Richter did not have to wait long for a response.

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

“Well met traveler,” she said in her smooth melodic voice. “You stand before the Hearth Tree of the Wood Sprites of Nadria. I am the Hearth Mother, protector of our people and keeper of our secrets. I am known as Hisako. What may we call you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I accept,” he said.

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

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

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

You have been given Sprite Arrows of Nature. Quantity 20. Durability 4/4. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Accuracy +1. Damage +1

Now that’s an upgrade, he thought with a smile. “Let’s go hunt some wolves!”

CHAPTER 4



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

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

“So what can you tell me about the forest?”

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

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

“We do not bicker and argue like humans. We do not question the wisdom of our leaders, and by knowing of our place, we serve the Spirit of the Forest. I would not bring dishonor upon myself by saying that it’s absolutely ridiculous that we need a smelly stomper like yourself to help us, especially when I can’t reliably determine the difference from when he has spoken or broken wind.” Sion paused for a moment, “I would never utter such words.”

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

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

Continuing to move forward, it was about another hour before Sion raised his hand silently. Making eye contact, he motioned to a tree up in front of them to the left. Nocking an arrow, Richter slowly stepped forward, walking through the trees as silently as he could. As he passed a lichen

covered boulder, he saw the wolf. Its head was down as it greedily tore into what looked to be a rabbit. It was a mangy thing, brown and dusky gray in patches. On its side was an area bare of hair, giving the appearance of having been gnawed away. It would reach to almost waist height if it was standing straight up. He could see its ribs silhouetted against its skin.

Slowing his breathing, he released the arrow with his exhale and struck the wolf its haunch. It immediately dropped the rabbit with a yelp and turned its eyes towards him, teeth bared. Richter saw its blood shot eyes and foaming mouth, and knew he had discovered the reason for the wolves leaving their normal hunting grounds. They were rabid! All such deductive thoughts fled his mind however, as it launched itself at him, seeming to cover the twenty yards in a blink. Reacting instinctively he dove to the left barely missing the wolf's lunge. He fell sprawling, arrows falling out of his quiver and over his shoulder. Knowing he had bare moments before feeling the wolf's teeth sink into him, he drew his dagger and rolled over. He had barely turned when the wolf was upon him, lunging for his throat. Shoving his forearm against the wolf's throat he attempted to stab it with the knife in his other hand, but the blade stopped on the wolf's ribs, barely penetrating. The wolf strained again, the fangs now mere inches from his face. Flecks of the wolf's slobber fell upon his face, mixed with gobbets of flesh from the animal it had been eating. It strained against his forearm to get close enough to sink its teeth into Richter's throat and end his life.

Screaming in horror and anger, Richter adjusted the angle of the knife in his hands and stabbed it into the wolf on top of him. The blade now easily slide between the ribs of the wolf as he stabbed it again and again, hot blood spilling over his blade, then his hand and then his arm, but he still didn't stop and neither did it. Changing his angle of attack he stabbed farther up towards the wolf's head and felt the knife pierce the wolf's heart with the barest resistance followed by a small pop. The wolf seemed unaware of its own death for the briefest of moments before collapsing on top of Richter.

“Ahhh, Arghh,” Richter grunted attempting to push the wolf’s body off of himself, and then instead settled on rolling it to the side. He took several deep frantic breaths as he willed his heart to stop beating so wildly.

Rabid Forest Wolf (Lvl 4) has died. You receive 32(+8) exp

Staring up at the green canopy above him with splotches of blue seen through the leaves, he was elated. “Woooo,” he shouted punching his fist into the air. Turning his head to the right, he saw Sion looking at him quizzically.

“What are you doing,” the sprite asked.

“I’m celebrating, and where were you during the fight?”

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

Slowing turning his head to the left, he saw two rabid wolves with their teeth bared, not 15 feet away. Before he could move, the wolves were on him and his world narrowed to consist only of fangs, blood, and above all, pain.

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

You have died.

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

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

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

As his mind continued to torture him however, another emotion rose. As he thought about the experience and the pain, he began to feel something else besides horror. It started as the kernel of a feeling, barely noticeable, inconsequential even. But it grew. After a while he recognized this feeling. He felt anger! No, that wasn't the right word. He felt... rage! He raged at the wolves for hurting him! He raged at Sion for not helping him! More though, he raged at being helpless and afraid! Not just in the past moments, or the past day, but instead at feeling just a bit afraid his entire life! Of not having any true control over his life's direction, and instead bowing time and again to the demands of society, the demands of his family, or the ridiculous demands he made of himself fueled by reality TV and pop culture. He felt the need to take control over his own life, face any issue head on and no longer escape!

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

You are Resolute! The choices in your life led you to a critical point. A nexus of opportunities were laid before you, many leading to disaster! You have chosen a finer path! The experiences of your entire life have culminated in this one moment. You have decided not to kneel, but to stand; not to beg, but to take; not to wait, but to forge ahead. Bonus to mental resistance 15%. Bonus to spiritual resistance 15%

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

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

“Universe, you’re a dick.”

CHAPTER 5



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

Name: Richter

Age: 24

Level: 2, 0%

Health: 100 Mana: 100 Stamina: 100

Strength: 10

Agility: 10

Dexterity: 10

Constitution: 10

Endurance: 10

Intelligence: 10

Wisdom: 10

Charisma: 10

Luck: 10

Abilities:

Limitless

Gift of Tongues

Skills:

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

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

Marks:

None

Resistances:

Mental 15%

Spiritual 15%

Race: Human (Chaos Seed)

Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”

Alignment: Neutral

Language: All

He had expected the loss in experience, but the loss in skill progression was a bit of a shock. At his low level, it was not much of a setback. Skills were always harder to level at high levels though, and a loss at that point would truly hurt. If he remembered correctly, neither skill had been close to leveling when he died. Maybe if his percentage was greater, he wouldn't always go back to zero. Either way, dying had real consequences.

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

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

Focusing on the task at hand, he continued running forward, his new body seemingly up to the task of moving at high speed for several miles before running out of steam. He pushed himself until his breath grew ragged, and sweat flowed in rivulets down his body, and then he pushed more. He ran until his stamina bar came perilously close to zero, and fainting seemed a real possibility. He would pause while it slowly built back up, but at 50%, would take off again. He had run many miles, and was nearing the end of his stamina for at least the tenth time, when he heard melodic voices above him.

“Quick! Shoot before he gets any closer!”

Throwing his hands up, he said, “Stop! I’m Richter, and have been seen by the Hearth Mother. I am approaching the Hearth Tree to fulfill the quest she posed to me. I will kill the wolves.”

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

Though he couldn’t see them, he knew he was being shadowed by the sprites. Word of his approach would likely make its way ahead of him, but he still slowed to a jog so as not to alarm the wary sprites. Checking his status, he saw that his Agility had increased by +1 due to his hours of running. After proceeding for a ways through the forest, he was finally rewarded with the sight of the Hearth Tree. As he approached the tall gold grass, the forms of Hisako, Sion and four other bowmen greeted him

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

“Why have you returned,” she asked. “I know that you had fallen.”

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

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