

“What do you mean ‘the judge has thrown out the appeal?’” Michael yelled in the phone’s receiver. “He can’t do that, she’s my daughter!”

“Mister Rostov,” the woman on the other end said in a far too calm voice, “We presented the appeal to the judge, but in view of your dishonorable discharge he—”

“I was set up! I told you that, I told them!”

“You did,” she replied, still too calm for Michael’s liking, “but you couldn’t provide any evidence of that. Unless that’s changed, we can’t go back to the judge on that account, but it wasn’t the only factor. Your inability to keep any sort of employment over the last year, your lack of support from your family, and the way you lost your temper at the custody hearing led him to decide there was no point in letting the appeal go through.”

“What did they expect me to do?” Michael snapped. “They took my daughter away from me! What kind of father am I if I just sit there and don’t fight for her? What kind of soldier?” The plastic of the receiver’s handle creaked as he tightened his grip on it. How could she be so calm about this? Was she some emotionless drone? She was talking about the only reason he had left to live.

“You aren’t a soldier, Mister Rostov, not anymore. And the judge expects you to be the kind of father who can accept the judgment and work on improving his situation while his daughter lives with his wife.”

“She’s not my wife,” he said flatly, tired. “She divorced me; took everything except the house.” The anger came back. “She had no fucking right to take my daughter too.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with the divorce case, but at least she left you a place to live. Mister Rostov, many spouses don’t leave anything to a man in your situation. My recommendation is to take this time to work on your condition. Go see a therapist, find work, keep it for at least six months, then come see us and we will be happy to bring your case back to the judge and discuss visitation rights.”

Michael couldn’t find the words, a therapist? How was he supposed to pay for that without help from the military? He’d tried to keep a job, but no one would cut him any slack when he had a panic attack.

“Thank you for choosing Malone, Stein, and Jude to represent you, Mister Rostov,” she said, sounding like they’d reached a pleasant conclusion. “We look forward to more of your business.” And she hung up.

Michael held the receiver to his ear, desperately trying to come up with something to say to get her back. They couldn’t abandon him like that. They had no right. Lawyers were supposed to work for him, fight for him. Now they’d left him behind, alone, to fend for himself.

The loud beeping from the receiver told him he needed to hang up. He looked at the bills on the table as he put the receiver down; all of them with late notices. How was he supposed to pay any of them when he didn’t have any money? Couldn’t anyone cut him any slack?

He couldn’t breathe. Fuck. He needed to breathe. He was going to lose everything. He was going to end up like those other veterans dying in the alleys. He grabbed his Colt Government, the one thing he’d managed to smuggle out when he was discharged. Made sure there was a bullet in the chamber and flicked the safety off.

He was not going to turn into one of those wrecks.

The phone rang, and he snatched the receiver off. “Yes?” he asked desperately.

“Mister Rostov, it’s Denis Vignoly, it’s been a couple of days since we talked.”

“Yes, tell me you found something, please. I need some type of evidence General

Carpenter set me up.”

“I’m dropping your case.”

“What? You can’t do that. I paid you for three months, gave you all I had left, I need that proof.”

“I’m sorry, Mister Rostov. I’m mailing you a check for the amount you paid me. I can’t continue working for you. Don’t call me back.” The line went dead.

Michael hurried to search through the address book next to the phone for the private detective’s number. He hung up, picked up the receiver, and punched in the numbers. He got the rapid tone telling him the other end was on a call. Or, more likely, hadn’t hung up to make sure Michael couldn’t call him back.

Michael hung up.

This was it, he realized. The PI had been his last hope for getting Mary back, of getting his life back. He looked at the Colt as the phone rang. He ignored it—what was the point—picking the gun up. It had saved his life multiple times while deployed in the Gulf. It was only fitting it would end his misery now.

The phone still rang. It was on the twentieth ring, Michael realized absently. Didn’t they know to hang up after five unanswered rings? He turned the Colt in his hands. He wasn’t afraid, he wasn’t panicking. He was calmer than he remembered being in a long time. This was the right course, the only course he had left.

Thirty-five rings.

He stared at the phone. Couldn’t they just hang up? Wasn’t it clear he didn’t want to talk to anyone? He wasn’t here anymore. He turned the Colt, looked down its barrel.

Hell, his mother’s voice sounded from his memories. Suicide led to hell.

He’d been in hell already, for six months now; was still there, so what did it matter if with a few pounds of pressure on the trigger he ended up in the hell of his mother’s beliefs?

Fifty rings? Really? What was so important?

He grabbed the receiver. “What?” he demanded.

“Hello, Michael,” a man said. The voice wasn’t familiar, and it had something to it, like it was run through a sound manipulation board like they did for computers on television shows.

“Who is this?”

“I am someone with an offer.”

He groaned. “Look, I don’t want to buy anything. Call someone else.”

“What if you had a second chance?” the man asked as Michael pulled the receiver away. He hesitated, brought it back to his ear.

“What do you mean?”

“I understand things are difficult for you right now. What if you could restart anew?”

Michael looked at the bills, his gaze falling on the eviction notice. He’d bought this house when he and Lianne were married, and now some faceless bank was kicking him out. “Restart how? Would I get my daughter back? My life? I don’t understand what you’re talking about. Are you offering me a job?” Michael put the Colt back on the table. What kind of job could it be that a stranger called him out of the blue?

“I am offering you a chance to restart anew. What comes of it will be up to you. If you accept, your fate will be entirely in your hands. You will get to decide what you do; if you don’t want to blindly take orders, you will never have to.”

Michael closed his eyes. Taking orders was how he’d ended up here. Never questioning

them, even when they felt wrong. When he opened them, he was mesmerized by the word floating before him, shimmering lightly.

Restart?

He didn't understand how he could see it, but the only thought he had was 'what do you have to lose'?

"Yes."

* * * * *

Darkness.

Michael didn't know how he'd gotten here, or where here was. He tried to move and found he couldn't. It was more than being restrained, he didn't feel his body. No, no. What had they done to him? God, he'd been captured, they were going to torture—

"Who are you?" a voice resounded from the darkness all around him. A deep voice, authoritative.

"Michael Vladmyr Rostov, Sergeant in the United States Army, 85-632-47, born fifteenth of May 1962," he answered reflexively.

Name	Michael Vladimir Rostov
------	-------------------------

Michael groaned in spite of himself. "You spelled it wrong. It's Vlad-myrr. No middle 'I' and the other one's a 'Y'. Everyone spells it wrong." Only then did he wonder how his name could be floating before him.

Name	Michael Vladmyr Rostov
------	------------------------

Michael realized the voice, and then the strangeness of this floating box had prevented his panic attack. Now, looking at them in the air before him, he had to wonder at something else. Maybe he'd imagined that phone call, and he'd pulled the trigger after all.

"Is this hell?" he asked, unsure if the voice would answer him; or if he wanted it to answer.

"This is neither your hell nor your heaven," the voice said as another box appeared under Michael's name.

Statistics	
Strength	10
Agility	10
Intelligence	10
Endurance	10
Wisdom	10

"This is a place of transition."
The numbers shimmered and changed

Statistics	
Strength	14
Agility	12
Intelligence	11
Endurance	15
Wisdom	8

Michael stared at them, realizing they formed a somewhat accurate representation of who he was; military training had made him strong and tough, he'd always been physically decent, and he'd considered himself of average intelligence.

"Can I ask for a change? I think I'm wiser than the average person. That's what ten is, right, the average?" Why wasn't he panicking? "Those numbers represent me, right?" He ignored the numbers of bad decisions he'd made, the many times a mission had felt wrong and he'd let a superior talk him into them anyway.

"Your starting statistics are set based on the life you lived, then constrained within set parameters. They cannot be changed here."

"Lived? So I'm dead?" The idea didn't scare him as much as he'd expected. The idea of never seeing Mary again, never holding her, left a hole in his heart, but she was with her mother. He had to hope she'd remember him well, and not as the disgraced man who'd returned from the war.

"You are transitioning," the voice said.

"To where?"

The voice remained silent.

"You said the numbers can't be changed here. That implies they can be changed elsewhere. Is that where I'm transitioning to?"

"Statistics can be improved as you gain experience and skills," the voice said.

At least that implied he was going to be doing something, where ever he was going. "Are you an alien?" Michael asked, the absurd thought popping out before he could stop himself. "Is this what this is? You've abducted me, now you're going to run experiments on me?"

"No," the voice stated with what Michael thought was a hint of annoyance.

"Okay, what can you tell me about where I'm going?"

"That is not my role."

"What is your role?"

"Arranging the transition."

Michael looked at the numbers, his statistics. "So, is there more to it than that?" he asked after a few seconds with nothing happening.

"No," the voice said. "Restarting now."

The darkness exploded with light.

Light; warmth, the smell of dew on the grass, the sounds of the leaves rustling in the breeze. Michael took a deep breath. The air was clean and fresh. He tried to remember when he'd ever smelled air this clean; certainly not in the city. Four years ago, he was on leave. He and Lisanne took Mary camping in Yellowstone, away from

everything and everyone.

“Hello Michael,” a woman greeted him.

Michael opened his eyes.

He was in a clearing. The sun wasn’t visible, still behind the trees, but the sky was blue with a few wisps of cloud. The woman wore a white toga of sort, leaving her light brown arms uncovered.

“Hello,” Michael replied.

She had an inviting smile, the kind his mother would give Mary any time they visited, although this woman looked younger than Michael, mid-twenties at most.

“This is probably going to come across as stupid, but where exactly am I?”

“That is a perfectly reasonable question,” she replied, “this clearing is in the Armoston forest, at the edge of the Cosconius Territory, and I am Gilda.”

“I’ve never heard of those places, Gilda, where on Earth are they?”

Her smile faltered. “They aren’t on Earth, Michael. You are no longer on Earth. Didn’t Tansit explain?”

The darkness, with his name and statistics.

Name	Michael Vladmyr Rostov
Statistics	
Strength	14
Agility	12
Intelligence	11
Endurance	15
Wisdom	8

The information appeared as he thought about it, and faded away. “So, is this heaven then?” He had to be dead.

“No. This is neither of the places you call Heaven or Hell, although it is within your power to make it either if you so desire.”

“If I tell you that doesn’t make sense, will you hold it against me?”

She smiled, “I will not, Michael. That is a common enough belief, although you are among the few who remained calm confronting this new reality. Many panic about now, once it sinks in they have left many people behind.”

Michael forced a smile, trying not to think about Mary. “I had no one to leave behind. She was already taken from me. And I’m still not entirely sure I’m not dead, so I might as well see where this goes, right?”

“I see.” Her expression didn’t change

Michael put his past behind him, dead or not, there was no going back. “So, what happens now?”

“Now, you tell me about yourself. Who were you, Michael Vladmyr Rostov? Who do you wish to be?”

Michael shrugged. “You know my name, I was a soldier. I joined right out of school, it’s the thing everyone in my family does. Army all the way to, well, for as long as there’s been an army. Stories claim there was a Rostov in Washington’s army.”

“And is a marshal man what you wish to be here?”

“Marshal man.” Michael worked the words in his head. “I like that. It’s all I know. If I say yes, does that mean it’s all I can be?”

“No, Michael, here, there are no limits to what you can be. I am simply determining how you will start. What you do from there, what you learn, how you shape this world, will be entirely up to you.”

Michael groaned. “Great, school again.” He thought of his intelligence score and it popped up.

Intelligence

11

“School is not the only way to learn here, it is not even the best way to learn.”

“How else am I going to learn?”

“The principal way is by doing. But you will understand this better once you are out in the world, living your life. For now, have you made a decision on what skill set you wish to start with?”

Michael chuckled. “You make it sound like you can just wave your hand and have me know stuff. I guess being a marshal man will do to start.”

“No hand waving is needed.”

You have learned a skill

Thrust, One-Handed Sword

level 1

You have learned a skill

Thrust, Knife

level 1

You have learned a skill

Slashing, One-Handed Sword

level 1

You have learned a skill

Slashing, Knife

level 1

You have learned a skill

Parry, One-Handed Sword

level 1

You have learned a skill

Parry, Knife	level 1
--------------	---------

You have learned a skill

Blocking, Shield	level 1
------------------	---------

You have learned a skill

Bashing, Shield	level 1
-----------------	---------

You have learned a skill

Brawling	level 1
----------	---------

You have learned a skill

Dodging	level 1
---------	---------

You are currently level 1 in the Marshal skill category

As he reeled from the information scrolling on the right side of his vision, Michael felt his shirt and pants shift, and instead of them, he now wore some sort of hard leather armor, with a wooden shield buckled to his left arm and a sword in his right hand.

“How?” he couldn’t even articulate the rest of his question. This was impossible.

“My role is to answer your questions and prepare you for the rest of your life here. As a marshal man, you need skills and tools; I have granted you such.”

“So you can just give me stuff?” He looked at the sword. “Any chance you can give me an M16 instead of this?”

“I’m afraid that such an item is beyond my capability.”

Michael nodded. “Then how about making me better with this sword? I’ve never used one of those.”

She pondered the question for a few seconds. “Michael, this is the start of your new life. My role is only to prepare you for it, not to give you an unfair advantage. If you decide to use your sword, you will become better with it, the same with any skill you learn and practice. This world rewards those like you who take part in it, but you are not required to do so. If you decide to build a cabin and spend the rest of your days there, you will not be punished for doing so.”

“I’m not someone who sits and does nothing.”

“Then, whatever you decide to do, you will be able to become as good at it as the

work you put into it.”

“Okay, so what’s next?”

“If you have no more questions, you set on your journey.”

“To where?”

She motioned around the clearing. “To where ever you want. Nothing is predetermined here. The path is for you to choose.”

“Can’t you at least tell me what’s the best place to go toward?”

“That is outside my duties.”

Michael looked at the sky, the sun was coming up over the tree line. “Can you tell me where the closest city is?”

“The city of Novus Roma is two scores of days toward the rising sun.”

Michael looked at the little of it over the trees. “A score is a lot of days, isn’t it?”

“A score is twenty days,” she said.

“That’s a little far. How about the closest place? Town, village, I don’t know what other names small places have.”

“The village of Windfall lies at the end of this path, a few hours away.” She indicated a break in the trees and Michael noticed the grass had been trampled there.

“I can do a few hours. Then what?”

“Then, whatever you want,” she answered.

“You’re not coming with me, are you?”

“My place is here, at the start of your journey. Once you set on your path, the start is done.”

“So, as long as I stay here, you’ll impart your wisdom to me?”

“I will answer your questions, yes.”

Michael smiled. “What do I need to know to survive this place?”

“Practice the skills you wish, trust in yourself, those worthy of it around you, and higher powers, if you are one as such.”

He narrowed his eyes. “That’s not exactly useful.”

“That wasn’t exactly a precise question,” she replied in amusement.

“So it’s all up to me.” Michael tried to sound confident. When was the last time he’d been left alone to do anything? He’d always been part of a team, a family. Even in his youth, it had been him, his brothers, and sisters. His dad hadn’t been as hard-assed about drills and such as some of the other military fathers, but he had raised them to depend on one another.

Of course, that had ended the day Michael had dishonored the Rostov name. He’d been abandoned by everyone he’d known and depended on, so it made sense he was alone here too.

“Windfall is at the end of that path,” he said, “but I don’t have to follow it. I could go anywhere.”

“That is correct. You can go anywhere you want.”

There was no path leading east, so if he wanted to go to Novus Roma, he’d have no guide other than the rising sun. The idea of setting off without a plan was exciting and

scary. He'd always worked off plans before. Join the army, start a family, go up within the ranks. Deployments always came with a plan, even if it was just set up camp and wait for orders.

He could do anything here.

He set toward the path. He'd start by seeing what this village of Windfall was like and go from there.

He stopped and turned. "Oh, Gilda, if I need—" the clearing was empty.

Right, he'd set on his path. This wasn't her place anymore. Somehow, he hadn't expected it to be quite this literal. With a shrug, he turned back to the path and followed it. There was no turning back anymore.

As he walked, the forest lightened and the path turned from trampled grass to packed dirt. When it merged with a stone road the forest had given way to hills covered with growing wheat and the occasional farmhouse visible in the distance.

He could just make out a palisade when a group of people became visible, running in his direction. Michael sped up, returning their waves. As they became clearer, he realized their waving was frantic, telling him to turn back.

"Monsters!" the man in the lead yelled. "A horde of them is attacking the village, run away!" Six followed him, three men and three women. "Didn't you hear me!" the man yelled as Michael got closer. "Flee or you'll die. The militia will never be here on time; the others will all die."

Others? Die?

"You left people behind?" Michael asked.

"I told them to run! But the fools are waiting for the militia."

Quest	Windfall is under attack	Type	Situational
	The village of Windfall is under attack by a horde of monsters. The militia is on their way, but if they do not get here in time, people will die.		
	Will you help the village of Windfall?		

Of course, Michael thought, as he picked up speed again. The militia had to be that of Novus Roma, which Gilda said was two scores of days, forty days, away; they might have outposts, but the quest said they wouldn't get here on time.

What kind of place was this that information just showed up on the right side then minimized to the bottom? At least it wasn't in the middle of his vision. He'd thought the skill list had been something Gilda had made happen, but if everything worked like that here, it would take some getting used to.

"The other way!" the man yelled as Michael ran by him.

"I'm not leaving people to be killed!" Michael yelled back and ignored the

comments. They were dressed simply, pants and shirts, the one in the lead had a rough vest. They reminded him of pictures of medieval people. Maybe the sword and shield hadn't simply been an affectation from Gilda, but was the norm here? Had he somehow been transported back in time?

Had the past had those messages for everyone to see?

He ran by another group, these much slower because they were helping three injured men. Michael made out animal bites and claw marks. Were the monsters just wild animals?

You have learned a skill	
Running	level 1

The message stayed only long enough for him to read, then disappeared in the bottom right where all the others had gone. He'd learned how to run by running? He'd already known how to do that, this made little sense.

Screams ahead told him to worry about that later. He pulled the sword out of its scabbard and hoped using it would come as easily, because that was something he'd never used before.

He ran through the opening in the palisade and past the wooden houses on each the other side. They were mainly one-story hovels, with a few two-story ones. He saw people inside through the windows. A few looked at him in terror. Whatever was attacking, those buildings wouldn't offer any protection. Screaming came from further in, as well as... some sort of animalistic screeching.

He ran around a building and froze. A man was fighting two... creatures were the only term Micheal could ascribe to them, using a pitchfork. They were small, hardly more than two feet in height with gray leathery skin, but fought viciously. The man screamed as one creature lunged at his leg and bit.

Michael pushed through his surprise and ran to help him, slashing twice and cutting both creatures in two.

You have gained a level	
Slashing, One-Handed Sword	level 2

He let the notification fade away. That had been surprisingly easy.

"Can you walk?" He asked the man.

"Are you from the city?" he replied.

"No, but I'm still going to help." Michael looked toward more screeching and yells. "How many of these things are there?"

"A horde."

Not helpful, Michael thought, but the man already looked freaked out enough he didn't need berating. "Get as many people as you can and get out of here?"

"The city militia will be here, they will save us, Praetor Granus promised us

protection when we joined his protectorate.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like they are going to be here on time. Get everyone you can and head out of the village!”

You have learned a skill

Leadership	level 1
------------	---------

The man nodded and hobbled to the closest door, and Michael ran for the noise. He nearly froze again; a thirty-foot section of the palisade was down with a dozen burly men doing their best to keep the creatures from breaking through. Michael hadn’t known what to think when the man had described the attackers as a horde, but through the opening the creatures were massed further than he could see.

He ran by bodies, dead men and creatures, and jumped in to take the place of a falling man.

You have learned a skill

Jumping	level 1
---------	---------

He slashed at the horde of creatures, each swipe felling three, but with more taking their places.

You have gained a level

Slashing, One-Handed Sword	level 3
----------------------------	---------

He used his shield as best as he could to bash them, but they grabbed onto it; their weight pulling him down, until he could shake them off and regain his footing.

You have gained a level

Bashing, Small Shield	level 2
-----------------------	---------

The men on his left and right were fighting with clubs that might have been farm implements before. The creatures slashed sharp claws at him. His armor took the brunt of them; but they left furrows in the hard leather and too quickly he felt the cuts in his flesh.

At the bottom of his vision, a bar flashed into existence; red, and a little of it disappeared with each cut he felt. It faded away if he could avoid getting hurt for a few seconds, but it didn’t replenish. In the upper right corner, an icon appeared, a blood drop, more piling on each time he felt claws.

The man on his right fell under half a dozen creatures; his pained screams ending when one bit his neck open, creating a feeding frenzy.

Michael swallowed bile and looked away to deal with his own assault. For the moment the frenzy was keeping any of them from pushing through and into the village.

You are now level 2

He could feel blood leaking under his armor from all the cuts the creatures caused. A bar appeared, this one yellow and dropped steadily as the exhaustion of the fight took its toll. The visual indicators were nice, not that he could make use of them and go rest.

His right bracer was gone, cut, and chewed to pieces. Each swipe of his sword left it worse for wear. It might be iron, but it wasn't good quality. More creatures fell under his sword. With one more bash, his wooden shield fell to pieces. He kicked, slashed, and punched.

You have learned a skill	
Kicking	level 1

You have gained a level	
Brawling	level 2

You are now level 3

His red bar dropped below half, the yellow one was at a quarter. He barely had enough strength to swing his sword, and with the next one, that no longer mattered as it broke. A wave of creatures staggered him back. He punched, but his movements were sluggish. Unlike before, he just shoved those he punched back, instead of killing them.

They were around him, more running into the village now that most of the protectors were down.

They threw themselves at him and he barely managed to remain standing. The red bar dropped steadily toward the quarter; the yellow one had no more than ten percent left.

Whatever this world was, he wouldn't get to experience it.

He was saddened, he'd hoped to make more of his second chance, but at least he'd go down swinging and protecting people.

The creature that had made it to his shoulder flew off and back into the horde. Behind Michael, someone yelled and more arrows flew around him, hitting the creatures. He managed to shake more off, but there were still too many. His red bar kept going down, even if he prevented them from hurting him. Or at least he thought he was; he wasn't sure he could feel anything as tired as he was.

A gloved hand grabbed a creature off Michael and pull it off him. A sword stabbed through another. Hands pulled Michael back and dragged him when he lost his footing. He made out chainmail, glinting in the sunlight, a white cloth over the front with a symbol he didn't understand. He was propped seated against a wall.

“Astair! I need you,” the man yelled. “This man is dying!” A face appeared in his sight, so damned young, tanned skin, green eyes. “You’re going to be okay, Astair will see to you.” The face left.

Michael wasn’t certain how okay he’d be, the red bar was still dropping even though he was out of the fight. He’d be out of it permanently soon.

Since he had nothing else to do while he waited to die he looked at the blood drop icon and tried to understand what it meant.

You are bleeding	Debuff	Stackable
You’ve received a cutting injury, and will lose 1 hit point per second until you heal at least one hit point. Each debuff will cause the loss of 1 hit points per second, but they are all canceled with the healing of 1 hit point.		

Michael smiled to himself, so that was why there was so much of a push to use first aid as quickly as possible. One application stopped all blood loss. This system of messages made understanding why he should do something so much easier.

A shadow fell over him as his hit points fell dangerously close to the ten percent mark, the red bar now flashing. He looked up at a gaunt face, gray eyes. The man placed a hand on Michael’s chest and closed his eyes. He thought he saw light glowing under the hand, but before he could focus on it he was busy gasping as he felt better and the hit point bar rose above the quarter mark. The stack of blood drop icons faded away as one.

The gaunt man stood and walked off without a word.

Michael sat more comfortably. He still hurt, but he didn’t seem to be in danger of dying anymore. The hit point bar faded away and the yellow one appeared, the bar slowly going up. His stamina? Tiredness?

Men in chainmail were fighting the creatures; no, massacring them. They acted in coordinated lines, spears holding the front back, archers firing into the body of the horde. Michael didn’t even see one of them get bitten or clawed. This was now just a question of how long it would take for them to kill or push the creatures back.

Quest	Windfall is under attack	Completed
With your help, the horde was held back until the city Militia arrived. Congratulations.		

You are now level 4

That was nice. The message faded away, then the box in the bottom right also faded. He focused on it and it became opaque again, the list of messages scrolling up until he closed his eyes to avoid being overwhelmed. When he opened them, the box was

gone, but if he looked in that corner, it came back. He looked away before all the messages appeared again.

He focused at the bottom of his vision and three bars appeared, one red, still just above the quarter mark, one yellow, which was nearly full, and one blue, which was full. Hit points, stamina, and...what was the blue one for?

He looked in the upper left, leaving the bars to fade away. And a box there appeared, then expanded to cover a third of the left side of his vision

Name	Michael Vladmyr Rostov	
Level	4	
Race	Human	
Age	32	
Aging speed Reduction	80.65%	
Statistics		
Strength	14	
Agility	12	
Intelligence	11	
Endurance	15	
Wisdom	8	
Faith		
Statistic Points to distribute	15	
Hit Points	44 out of 150	
Stamina points	164 out of 164	
Essence points	91 out of 91	
Trait points to distribute	4	
Traits		
Facility with Numbers	Level 1	
Language(spoken) Cosconian		
Skills		
Marshal Skills	Category level 1	
Thrust, One-Handed Sword	1	
Thrust, Knife	1	
Slashing, One-Handed Sword	5	
Slashing, Knife	1	
Parry, One-Handed Sword	1	
Parry, Knife	1	
Blocking, Small Shield	1	
Bashing, Small Shield	2	
Brawling	2	
Dodging	1	
Leadership	1	
Athletic Skills	Category level 1	

Running	1
Jumping	1

There was so much information he wasn't sure what to do with any of it, but he realized it reminded him of the Dungeons and Dragons character sheets some of the soldiers used when they played between deployments. Fantasy worlds with numbers and stats governing what the players could do.

Was that what this was? Was he in one of those games? He groaned as he shifted. This didn't feel like a game.

He focused on this character sheet again as it began fading. He had fifteen points he could assign to his statistics. How did that work? He focused on wisdom.

<p>Wisdom is an indication of how wise you are. Wisdom is the basis of magic and governs how much Mana you have, as well as aptitude with your spells.</p>

It was nice that the stat was explained, Michael thought, if only it told him how to raise it.

He waited, but no information came up.

This was probably something he should have asked Gilda about.

Increase Wisdom, he thought.

Wisdom 9

Michael smiled. That was easy. He increased it again.

Wisdom 10

Now he was just as wise as everyone else. No more making stupid decisions like letting a three-star general talk you into a covert mission you didn't feel good about, or letting Stravinsky talk you into storming that house guns blazing just because those were the orders.

He focused on Strength

<p>Strength is an indicator of how strong you are. It governs how much physical damage you are capable of doing, as well as how much weight you can carry.</p>

He considered increasing it, putting all his points in there would make him a force to be reckoned with, but he hesitated. Was that the wisest way to do this? He'd gone from level one to four and gained fifteen points. He had five stats, so he could raise

everything by three.

He wished he could ask one of those D&D players what was the best way to do this.

He looked at his other stats

Agility is an indicator of your adeptness at physical tasks and governs physical skills.

Intelligence is an indicator of how smart you are and governs mental skills.

Endurance is an indicator of how tough you are and governs how many hit points and stamina you have.

His maximum hit points were one-fifty while his stamina was one-sixty-four, so there was more to it than just the stat. The difference between his stamina and hit point was fourteen, which was his strength. The one-fifty was his endurance times ten. His mana was one-eleven now, that was ten times his wisdom plus his intelligence. The only stat that didn't have an impact was agility, but that impacted his skills.

So what was the best way to do this?

"I see Astair did keep you alive," someone said, and Michael looked up at the now sweaty young face and green eyes. His tabard—that was what those were called—was bloody.

"He did, thank you. And thanks for the rescue. I figured I was dead."

I didn't expect to find anyone alive, to be honest." The man offered him his hand and pulled Michael to his feet. "I'm Primus Joran."

"Michael, Michael Rostov."

"Not a legionnaire then?" Joran asked. "I thought you might have been from one of the other outposts."

"I'm..." Michael trailed off. This was a new start for him. He could keep his disgrace to himself. "I was a soldier, but I had a disagreement with a superior officer and I was stripped of my rank."

The legionnaire looked back to the broken palisade where other soldiers were piling the creatures together. "They disagreed with how brave you were?"

Michael shook his head. "It was more political."

"That's why I intend to remain a legionnaire. Never have to deal with politics that way. I'd be honored if you traveled with us. We're going to escort the survivors back to Novus Roma, this village isn't safe anymore."

As the man spoke, soldiers brought people out of houses, terrified men and women, children. A girl, not older than five, calling for her mother as a soldier carried her away. She was no older than Michael's daughter. She could have been Mary.

His Mary could have died in such a place. Michael's hands starting to shake. He

closed them into fists and looked around, away from the little girl. He saw an open doorway and what looked like an empty room beyond it. “Excuse me,” he told Joran and hurried inside, closing the door.

No, no, no. He was supposed to save them, to save Mary. That was his job. “One job, Michael, you had one job and you managed to screw that up.” What if he’d lost more? What if his Mary had been one of the dead? What if everyone in the village had died because he was such an incompetent soldier? How many could have died because of him? Another hundred? A thousand? Was even one more dead acceptable? Was this any better than kicking the door in and opening fire on everyone inside? How had he thought he’d do anything other than screw this up? He’d screw up everything else, his marriage, any job he’d tried to keep after being discharged, he’d lost his house. Why had he thought this place was going to be any different?

Banging on the door made him back away. “Michael?” Joran called. “Are you alright?”

Michael noticed the blinking icon in the upper right and focused on it.

Panic Attack	Trait	Static
When things go wrong it’s normal to panic, but in your case sometimes the simple thought that something could go wrong, or have been worse, causes your body to react as if it was reality.		
While under a panic attack all skills and spells suffer a -25 level penalty. The Debuff will last until the attack is stopped.		

Michael let out a pained laugh. That was about right. He did wish the information had come with how he could stop it. Joran’s interruption had seemed to do the trick this time.

“Michael?” Joran called again.

“Yeah.” Michael calmed his breathing, tried to straighten what he wore, but there was nothing he could do about the state of his armor. He pulled the door open. “Sorry, I needed...” how was he going to explain what had happened to him?

“I take it you never had to go toe to toe with a horde of goblins while in your previous military.”

Goblins, that’s what those had been? “Yeah, I can say this was a first.”

“They can be pretty nasty. Easy to kill, but there’s always so many of them. If you’re not equipped to keep them away, they’ll overrun you.”

“Bury me was more what it looked like.”

“How are you? Can you walk? You don’t look able to carry anyone, but there isn’t any place in the wagons we’ve been able to collect. If you’re coming with us, you’ll have to walk.”

“I’m sore, but walking should be fine.”

“Good, how are you about wearing the armor of someone who died? Using his

sword? You don't look like you can do much currently."

"I... I don't know, I've never had to do it before."

"It's three days to the camp, and I doubt it's going to be eventless. With the goblins breaching the protectorate, other things will have made their way in. We'll have to cleanse the entire area before we can see about resettling it."

"Joran," an older man called. "We're ready to go, has your friend decided?"

"I'm going," Michael answered the other man

"Good." he turned and called to a group. "Lucius, you and your men are staying here to make sure those goblins are burned. Then you're torching the village, I don't want any trace of the incursion left."

"Isn't that extreme?" Michael asked Joran as he followed the younger man.

"There are smart monsters out there. If they get an idea there were people here, they might decide to see where they went. That would lead them deeper inside the protectorate, place other people in danger." He took a chainmail shirt out of a wagon carrying injured villagers. "Put this on. You'll probably have to wait until we're in Novus Roma to get something better fitting, but I can promise that after your heroism here, fitted chainmail is the minimum you'll get. I wouldn't be surprised if the Praetor himself will want to meet you."

The weight of the chain mail was more than he'd expected, but it rested comfortably over the undershirt. The sword was much better than the one that had broken fighting the goblins.

With the scent of burning goblins on the breeze the order to move out came.

"Joran," Michael asked. "Do you have any recommendations as to how I could distribute my points?"

The look the young man gave Michael made him suspect the other had decided he wasn't entirely sane.

During the first day's walk, Michael confirmed that the soldiers didn't know about statistics, or points he could distribute, by asking others. He made sure to keep plenty of the surviving villagers between the men he asked, keeping it simple and just asking about points distribution, stopping the instant he got 'the look'.

After getting 'the look' three times he considered that maybe he was crazy and what he saw was a representation of his insanity. He'd already considered he was dead, and this was some form of afterlife, but that fight had hurt too damned much for being dead. Or, this was real, and he somehow was different from the others? How was that any more implausible than the alternatives?

"How are you faring?" Joran asked at the end of the first day, handing Michael a bowl of thick stew with a chunk of dark bread in it. The soldiers and villagers were making camp for the night.

"Better than I expected, the cleric, Astair, did his trick on me and my he—the soreness is almost all gone." It surprised Michael how easy it had gotten to think of

himself in relation to the character sheet metaphor. At least he was no longer bringing it up any time he thought about his state. That had been an annoying half day as he worked out what type of mindset brought it to the surface. Now he could bring it up in whole or in part at will.

Hit Points	96 out of 150
Stamina Points	164 out of 164
Essence Points	91 out of 91

Some sections did seem to be impossible to split into smaller parts.

“Why does he look so gaunt?” Michael asked, tasting the stew as he ate the soaked bread. “If he can heal people, can’t he heal himself?” It wasn’t great, but it was edible.

Joran looked in the direction of the cleric. “Astair isn’t sick. It’s the price he pays to channel his god’s power into healing.”

Michael stopped his initial reaction. This place, this world, was different, so why couldn’t God act through people? “So the power he channels is what, eating him away? I thought God was benevolent.”

Joran glanced at Michael as he chewed on his piece of bread, then. “Are all the gods benevolent where you’re from?”

Gods, plural? “I thought so. To be fair, I’ve never been much of a believer. The world’s too screwed up for me to think h—they did anything.”

“You consider the world screwed up, and yet you expect Astair’s god to be a benevolent one? The country you come from sounds rather odd.”

Michael chuckled. “That’s definitely one word for it. So Astair’s god?”

“Dhomis is a god of healing through sacrifice,” Joran said. “Each of his clerics must sacrifice something significant to be granted his power.”

“I’m guessing it isn’t just something like forgoing any riches.”

Joran chuckled. “Nothing so easy to abuse, the gods don’t like it when you try to trick them. No, it as to be something the cleric will feel. Astair sacrificed food. He must go hungry or not be able to heal.”

“Isn’t that dangerous? Letting himself die of hunger?”

“The gods can be demanding, even more so if you want power from them. The way Astair explained Dhomis to me, the hungrier he is, the more healing he can perform. So he keeps himself at the edge for us.”

Michael shook himself. “I couldn’t do that.”

“Neither could I. It’s why I’m a soldier and not a cleric.”

“Are all the gods that demanding?”

“Oh no, Ivlan is a goddess of healing through pleasure. Her clerics must pleasure and be pleased to be able to heal.” The legionnaire gave a wry smile. “As you can imagine, they don’t perform very well on the battlefield.” He finished his bowl. “You’re going to have to sleep under the stars with the rest of us. We’re keeping the tents for the

villagers and the injured.”

“I can keep watch, help out where you need me.” Michael realized he'd finished his stew as they spoke, having only a small piece of bread left, which he popped in his mouth.

“I'm glad to hear it, but until we reach the outpost, consider yourself one of the rescues.”

“One who has to sleep under the stars,” Michael replied with a smirk.

“You look like you can take it, unlike that bunch of weaklings.”

Michael didn't like how Joran referred to the villagers, but looking at it objectively, it was an accurate description. The ones who'd survived had been those who ran away or hid. The brave one had all died.

* * * * *

When he woke up on the second day, Michael found he was completely healed. He'd somehow regained fifty points of health in one night of sleep when a full day of walking hadn't done anything. As far as he could tell, he was the only one who had done so, those who had gone to sleep with injuries, still had them in the morning.

Around mid-day, they were attacked by a band of monsters. Like goblins, but these were furrer versions and a little tougher. Michael joined in the fight, and with all the soldiers there, they were easily defeated. Michael got in enough fighting his sword and shield skills went up, but by the time the fight was over, there was nothing left of the wooden shield. He tried using the large ones the legionnaires used to form walls, but they were too unwieldy for him. He also went up a level and gained five more points that he still didn't know how to distribute.

When Astair reached him, Michael passed on the healing. He hadn't gotten as badly hurt as in that first battle, barely getting close to the halfway point with eighty health points left. Others needed Astair's help more than he did, and he wanted to test the limit of his nightly regeneration.

When they stopped for the night Michael was again left with nothing to do, so he sat and watched the legionnaires and villagers work. He noticed some of them starting fires, then noticed they weren't using tools to start them. He studied one of the woman work, she placed the wood in the pit the villagers dug, forming a small pyramid, knelt next to it and placed her hands over the kindling. Her lips moved, then she lifted her hands, and a flame jumped from the center of the pyramid, almost like magic.

When Joran joined him Michael pointed to the fires. “Is magic a thing here?”

“Isn't it where you're from?” The legionnaire answered, handing Michael a bowl of stew.

“No.”

Joran took a branch off the ground and held it before him, he narrowed his eyes and the end caught on fire. “There you go.”

“Can anyone do magic?”

“The simple stuff, sure.” Joran blew the flame out. “The more advanced you get, the more dedication it takes. It's quickly a question of what you want to focus on,

because I don't know anyone who has the time to focus on more than one. I'm a legionnaire. I'd have to give that up to learn anything beyond this and extinguishing fires with magic."

Michael nodded and ate a few spoonfuls before indicating the fire. "The legionnaire who lit that one said a spell and had hand gesture. Was that because lighting the fire is more difficult than the flame you did, where you simply squinted at it?"

Joran shook his head. "It's more about how you learn. What you do with a spell like flame, is gather the energy of the fire in your mind into a single point until it ignites. My mother taught me to do it just with my mind. Others learn to use gestures and words to reach the proper mindset, sometimes they'll break themselves out of the habit, sometimes they don't."

"So it's not an indication of talent. You're not necessarily more talented with the spell than she was because she did it with gestures."

"That's right. The best indicator of how skills someone is with a spell is how taxing it is to cast, not that you can see it, this simple of a spell wouldn't render you unconscious, but the stronger ones could drain you almost to death."

"So magic draws on your life force? Or something like that?"

Joran considered the question, looking at the fire. "I don't think so, I'm no mage and I never had a discussion with one, so I'm only going by what I've experienced and seen. I can make flames until I can't anymore and I'm going to feel the strain, but I can still get up and walk, I'm not bleeding from anywhere. I think it needs a conscious effort to use your life force, and maybe that's only possible with the powerful spells; those that require more energy than you naturally have to give. My mother explained it this way. The more skilled with a spell, the more you draw from the surrounding energy, instead of what's in you, so all things being equal, someone more skilled will always be able to use his spell more often than someone who isn't."

Michael stewed on that as he ate. "Do you think I can learn that spell?" he asked once he was done.

"Unless you're one of those people who just can't connect with the energy, I don't see why you couldn't."

Michael set his bowl down. "So how do I do it?"

Joran stared at him. "I told you, you gather the energy of the fire with your mind until the flame manifests."

"You just reach out and grab it, I guess."

"Didn't your mother explain it to you?"

"My mother sat me in front of a fire for three months until I could feel its heat, it's fieriness, even without it there. After that reaching for it was easier. It still took me months before I could make my first flame."

"So envision the heat on the end of this twig." Michael picked up a branch. "So all I have to do is focus on it." He imagined feeling the heat coming from the branch and thought he had it a few times, but the idea he was succeeding distracted him and he lost the sense of heat.

He noticed people moving around him but didn't pay them any attention. When staring at the branch gave him eye strain, he set it aside and looked at his hand. To make sure he could maintain it he moved his hand, feeling the heat. He closed his fingers and snapped them. A flame appeared at the tip of his index.

You have learned a spell	
Flame	level 1

Fire Spells is now level 1

With a curse, Michael shook his hand, and the flame extinguished itself.

The blue bar flashed into existence, the end losing some of the blue. So the blue one was for magic. He checked the numbers to be sure.

Hit Points	86 out of 150
Stamina Points	164 out of 164
Essence Points	81 out of 91

Interestingly, he'd regained hit points just sitting here. Was it the eating or the resting? But this confirmed the essence powered the magic. It matched with Joran's explanation. He was powering the magic.

He focused on his hand again, felt the heat, and snapped his fingers. The blue bar indicated another drop in essence as the flame appeared. He shook his hand before he could stop himself, then looked at his fingers for any indications they were burned. He remembered how hot the flame had felt, but his fingers were fine.

He did it again, this time trying to summon the flame without snapping his finger. The heat was there. It felt as intense as before, but nothing happened. He snapped his fingers, and the flame was there. The heat was that of actual fire and he shook his hand, cursing afterward.

You have gained a level	
Flame	level 2

"Thanks a lot," he told the message, annoyed, then noticed he'd drawn a small crowd, Joran among them. "I think I'm getting the hang of it."

"I barely explained it a few hours ago, and you're already doing it? Maybe you should be a mage, you look like you have the gift."

Michael shook his head. "This is just so I never have to worry about getting a fire going."

"So this is only about it being practical?"

"Sure, starting a fire can be a lifesaver out here, right?"

"Yeah." Joran looked around. "Rogs, show him your water thing."

Rogs was a big man, far larger than the other legionnaires, broad shoulders and with a face only his mother could love, Micheal thought, maybe, if she drank enough. His teeth were crooked and poked past his lips at odd angles. He wasn't repulsive, but definitely ugly.

Michael extended his hand to the giant of a man. "Rogs, I'm Michael."

"Joran told us. You held back the goblin horde."

The speech was more eloquent than Michael had expected. "I'm just happy you guys showed up when you did and saved my life." He forced himself to keep talking to keep his hands from shaking. "What's the water thing?"

Rogs cupped his hands before Michael and after a few seconds water began forming on the skin and pooling.

"Is that water or sweat?" Micheal asked.

"Water," Joran answered. Rogs was focused on his hands. "If you can do that, you never have to worry about dying of thirst."

Michael's eyebrow rose. "Do you happen to have something like that for food too?"

"I wish," a woman in armor said.

"That's part of the more advanced stuff I mentioned earlier. If you want to be able to do that, you're going to have to become a mage."

Michael nodded. There was a quarter of an inch of water at the bottom of Rog's cupped hands. The man was panting heavily.

"Don't hurt yourself, Rogs," Michael said.

"It's harder if I try to go faster," Rogs replied.

"Can you explain how you did it?"

Rog's explanation was easier to follow than Joran, possibly because the air was already humid and he talked about pulling the humidity from the air to his hand. By the time Rogs was done talking, Michael had his hand cupped, and a message appeared with the first bead of water.

You have learned a spell Condensation

level 1

Water Spells is now level 1

His essence bar dropped in a chunk similar to when he summoned the flame, but it kept dropping as another bead of water formed. Before a third one the bar flashed as it dropped to near nothing and Michael had to stop, panting.

"You make it look easy," He told Rogs with a grin.

The large man stared at him. "It took me three years to manage it the first time. You need to speak to the mages."

"No," Michael replied with a shake of the head. "I'm just a soldier."

"That may be," Joran said thoughtfully, "but I think you need to meet the Praetor

when we reach Novus Roma. That you learned to do those two spells in one evening will impress him enough he might make you a Prefect right then and there.”

“I’m just a soldier,” Michael repeated, “I don’t want any special treatment.”

“You might not want it, Michael,” Joran said, “but you should get used to receiving it right now.”

Novus Roma was a sight to behold.

Standing on a hilltop, Michael could see most of it in the distance, it didn’t look large compared to Detroit, or even Lansing, but the largest town Michael had seen in the month-long walk here had barely been two dozen buildings. This was hundreds, if not thousands of them, and they were so white. He couldn’t tell at this distance if it was whitewashed, or the natural color, but he was confident most of the buildings were stone instead of the wooden ones from the towns.

Two large avenues divided the city into quadrants, the one starting at the road they were on followed the constellation Joran called ‘The Arrow’. The other was ninety degrees to it, they connect at a coliseum in what appeared to be the center of the city. Smaller streets divided those quadrants into square blocks, only losing their squareness close to the wall, or the mountain cliff that lined what Michael thought of as the north-west of the city. He could make out even smaller streets, crisscrossing the blocks at any angles.

The Arrow was a constellation formed of seven stars, brighter than the others, that created an almost straight line that was used to navigate. It was twenty degrees off what Michael considered the east-west created by the sunrise and sunset, so had caused some confusion at first, but unless the sun was crossing their path, they were still visible during the day and he’d quickly adapted.

The trip gained Michael more than navigation knowledge.

After reaching the outpost, half the villagers decided to stay in the hopes of going back to their village. The group escorting them was reduced to sixteen men, from the initial thirty-two. Two Contubernium, Joran explained, there had been four that went to Windfall to fight the goblins.

While Michael was not a legionnaire, Joran had taken it upon himself to teach him the basics of sword fighting, handling a shield, and how to throw a proper punch. The legionnaire had found Michael a larger metal shield than the wooden one which had been destroyed. This one could take hits and last.

Michael had known he was bad at sword fighting and using a shield, but he’d expected to know how to throw a punch or block one. He’d gotten hand to hand training early in his service and he’d gotten to practice it often while deployed, but while he could remember how to fight, his body seemed to have forgotten. So it had taken him a few days before Joran stopped trashing him easily.

By the time Michael stood in the hill looking at Novus Roma, Most of his marshal skills had gone up significantly.

Marshal Skills	Category level 9
Bashing, Medium Shield	17 (base 15, plus bonus)
Bashing, Small Shield	5 (base 4, plus bonus)
Blocking, Brawling	17 (base 15, plus bonus)
Blocking, Medium Shield	17 (base 15, plus bonus)
Blocking, Small Shield	4 (base 3, plus bonus)
Dodging	17 (base 15, plus bonus)
Leadership	2 (base 1, plus bonus)
Parry, Knife	2 (base 1, plus bonus)
Parry, One-Handed Sword	17 (base 15, plus bonus)
Punching, Brawling	17 (base 15, plus bonus)
Slashing, Knife	2 (base 1, plus bonus)
Slashing, One-Handed Sword	17 (base 15, plus bonus)
Thrust, Knife	2 (base 1, plus bonus)
Thrust, One-Handed Sword	17 (base 15, plus bonus)

Something that had happened which Michael considered odd, based on the little he remembered overhearing from his buddies who'd played Dungeons and Dragons, was that he'd gone from level four to level eleven without any significant combat. He'd been certain combat was the only way to make that happen.

The only incident had been a group of bandits they'd uncovered and fought to submission. They had accompanied them as prisoners. Michael had taken part, but while he'd gained a level in his sword parrying skill, there had been no overall level gain. All those had come while training and gaining skill levels.

While not asking directly, he'd figured out what stats to raise. Joran had commented on his lack of strength, endurance, and coordination. So over the trip, each time he went up a level, he placed a point in those stats.

Name	Michael Vladmyr Rostov
Level	11
Race	Human
Age	32
Aging speed	60.24%
Statistics	
Strength	22 (base 21, plus bonus)
Agility	20 (base 19, plus bonus)
Intelligence	11
Endurance	22
Wisdom	10
Faith	

He couldn't seem to separate those two.

The main thing that had jumped out at him were the bonuses. Like his skills, some stats had them, while some didn't; and he couldn't figure out where they came from, or why he hadn't received a notification about them. They seemed to show up for everything else, why not bonuses? Without anyone to ask he decided to just put them out of his mind, he'd take them, even if he couldn't figure them out.

The other thing was his aging speed. That one worried him. If he aged sixty percent slower than everyone, how long until they noticed? What would they do? And how was it even possible?

Fortunately for Michael, they'd been camped when he first noticed it and had managed to make it to the woods before the freak-out hit. Was it based on his level? Would it turn negative if he went high enough? He had no interest in revisiting his teenage years. Once it passed, he'd decided he wouldn't worry about it. If eleven levels had only slowed it to sixty percent, he had time before it turned negative.

He'd also practiced his two spells, although he spend most of his time trying to get his flame to manifest somewhere other than his thumb. Joran could make anything he held catch fire, and some only had to look and say a few words or make gestures. Michael had to snap his fingers and the flame only appeared at the end of his thumb. If he wanted to start a fire he then had to put his thumb to the kindling.

* * * * *

"Done admiring the city?" Joran asked.

Michael looked at the legionnaire, then around them. The others were halfway to the city. "You should have shaken me."

Joran laughed. "And keep you from taking it all in?" He motioned to the city ahead of them.

"I was lost in my head."

"At least you didn't go hide this time."

Michael spun to stare at the legionnaire.

Joran raised his hands. "Peace, friend, peace. I noticed, but I didn't say anything to anyone. I've known others who've seen war. No one returned entirely whole. Just know that if you need help, I'm here."

Michael opened and closed his hands. He couldn't panic now, but if Joran had noticed, had anyone else? How many attacks had he had on the trip? Would those ahead tell their superior? Would they see him as damaged and refuse to let him join? What was he going to do if he couldn't—

Hands grabbed his shoulders hard. "Breathe, Michael," Joran said, searching his eyes. "It's all well. I'm here. Whatever you fear, it won't come to pass."

"You can't know that." Michael swallowed.

"Then if it does, you won't face it alone. I will be there with you."

"Thanks." He focused on Joran, the idea he wasn't alone. The thought others could know about his attacks scared him. That it could keep him from joining the army even more, but Joran had seen him fight, seen him improve, he'd be there to speak in his favor. "Are there any clerics that can fix my head like Astair heals our bodies?"

Joran shook his head as he pushed Michael forward. “Mind magic is dangerous, and Praetor Granius only allows the most skilled of the mages to practice it. The gods that grant power in that direction tend to be of the darker persuasion, so I wouldn’t trust their clerics to play in my head.”

“So you have evil gods?”

Joran shrugged. “How do you define evil?”

“Anything that aims to hurt others is evil,” Michael replied without hesitation.

“I don’t think any of the gods aim to hurt us, but they are beyond anything we can fully understand, and each one demands something. The darker gods do tend to draw men and women who care less about the wellbeing of others, but it doesn’t mean all their clerics do.”

“You said you wouldn’t let one play in your head,” Michael commented.

“And I wouldn’t let any of the Praetor’s mages do it either. I like my mind the way it is.”

Michael looked ahead at the city. “Who is this Praetor? I mean is he like the mayor of the city? The president?”

The legionnaire studied Michael. “The Praetor is the Praetor. He founded Novus Roma, he tamed this land that he came Cosconius. He taught us how to fight as units instead of disparate men.” Joran smiled. “He’s one of our great hero and he leads us.”

“A hero,” Michael wondered.

“Yes, like you.”

Michael frowned at Joran. “I doubt I measure up to him. I can’t believe you even want him to meet me. He has to have better things to do than that.”

“You will see, Michael, the Praetor will be pleased on meeting you.” He placed a hand on Michael’s back and gave him a light shove.

Utterly unsure of himself, Michael heading for the city

* * * * *

The gate in the stone wall was enormous, easily five-time his height and the same in width. The door was a massive wooden structure reinforced with iron bands. Groves in the road’s pavement indicated it was closed and opened regularly, but Michael couldn’t see how. Magic, maybe? He needed to remember that this world had more than the laws of physics he knew.

The avenue, once inside, was even wider, with people coming and going, some with carts pulled by bulls, or donkeys or— Michael stopped.

A muscular man covered with black fur pulled a cart loaded with pottery. His head was more animal than human, with a short muzzle and ears on top of his head. Other than a loincloth, his only clothing was the harness tying him to the cart a woman sat on, whip in hand.

Michael took a step in his direction, to free him, but Joran grabbed his arm.

“You don’t have beastkin where you come from?”

“That’s a man,” Michael pointed out.

“It’s an animal,” Joran said, “it only looks somewhat like us. They can be trained,

but only for menial tasks. Praetor Granius doesn't care for them, but many of the farmers make use of them so he allows their presence. Don't worry, you won't see many of them." The legionnaire took his arm and pulled him away. "Come, I want you to meet the Praetor before it gets too late."

Michael looked in the beastkin's direction before following Joran. He needed to remember he wasn't in the US anymore, or even on earth. He'd seen goblins who were nothing more than rabid animals. That some beast of burden here walked on two legs was also a thing. Michael expected he'd have to get used to a lot more while living here.

The center of the avenue had trees with benches in the shade and the occasional large fountain. On each side shops catered to the people who stopped by. The avenue was paved with identical square stones and was perfectly flat. If he ever returned to Michigan, he needed to bring back this technique and get rid of potholes forever.

As he'd expected at this point, every building was also made of stones, but taller, three stories being the average with a four-story one here and there. They were all perfectly maintained.

Each building was separated from the other by an alley, with some of them occasionally replaced by a narrow street. At regular intervals a road half the width of the avenue crossed it at ninety degrees, marking the blocks he'd seen from a distance.

Ahead of them, the coliseum grew larger, but they didn't reach it. Joran took the last road on the right. A few dividing streets later he entered one on the left and immediately Michael heard the sounds of fighting. Shortly it opened into a courtyard where a few hundred legionnaires trained.

Michael watched as groups moved in unison, against one another, wall shields moving aside to let spears jut out and then closed as they were pulled back. Other groups walked, their shields staying a wall, not breaking, as they turned or stopped. The shields exploded apart to let swordsmen burst out to slash and thrust, then returned within and the wall reforming.

At the periphery of it, all men and women fought, one on one, on two, on three and even one against four. The woman using two swords to keep them from scoring even one hit while Michael watched.

Chuckling, Joran pulled him. He stopped by a man leading eight pairs of young men and women in training to ask a question. The trainer pointed further in and Michael followed Joran, who stopped three more times to ask for direction before they reached a man wearing a simple armor of leather, fighting against an older man dressed similarly.

The older man noticed them and brought their fight to a stop with a nod.

"Praetor Granius," Joran said, standing at attention. "I'm Joran, son to Tivius, of the seventy-ninth Contuberium, out of the twenty-sixth outpost. We were dispatched to stop the goblin horde at Windfall."

The younger man, who'd looked bored through Joran's introduction, brightened at the last part. He looked at Michael, smiling. "Then this must be the hero of Windfall. I've heard a great many things about you." He stepped toward Michael, who took a step back reflexively. "I'm Granius Sepurcius Augustalis. Don't bother with the Praetor bit, I

keep trying to get them to stop, but they just won't. Something about showing me proper respect and all that. I tell them I'm just a soldier like they are, but it doesn't seem to sink in no matter how often I come here to train with them."

Michael swallowed, he was the Praetor? The man who ruled the city and everything under its protection? He looked to be no older than forty. Compared to the dour older man, he could be one of the other soldiers instead of a ruler.

Michael remembered himself and stood at attention, offering his hand as an afterthought. "Michael Vladmyr Rostov, sir."

Granius grasped Michael's forearm with both hands. "Well met, Michael Vladmyr Rostov. Well met indeed. But please relax. I'm just a soldier like you. I've heard much from the legionnaires who got here before you did. You kept the horde from overtaking Windfall by yourself."

"No, sir. Many brave men gave their lives to protect the others before I arrived. If not for them, I doubt even my efforts would have done any good."

"A man who recognizes the work of others." He looked at the older man over his shoulder. "Do you hear that, Hostus? A genuine humble soldier." He smiled at Michael, his grip tightening. "You are a rare breed, Michael."

"I'm just... I was simply a soldier, sir. Hoping to be one again."

Granius beamed and slapped Michael's shoulder. "Simple soldiers you and I, we are going to get along greatly. Come, show me what you can do with the sword and shield." The man pulled Michael away from the others.

"I'm not very good, sir." Michael hesitated. "Where I was a soldier before, we didn't use swords."

Granius nodded. "Then show me what you learned since arriving." He pulled a plain-looking sword from his scabbard and took the shield Hostus handed him. Michael readied his and waited. "Why don't you attack me," Granius said. "Take it at whatever speed you're comfortable, I just want to see what you can do."

Slowly Michael attacked and Granius parried. He attacked again, and the Praetor blocked with his shield. Michael picked up speed, and the other man matched him, returning the occasional attacks, which Michael parried or blocked. He understood Granius wasn't trying to win, but he still pushed Michael.

When Michael found himself with the point of Granius' sword over his heart, after a quick motion he'd thought was simply a parry, the Praetor smiled. "That was extremely good for someone who didn't know how to wield a sword when he arrived here, what, forty days ago?" Granius sounded proud, instead of mocking, as Michael had expected. "You're gifted with the sword."

Michael smiled and panted. He was sweating. He'd lost track of how long they fought. "Thank you, sir."

"Please stop it with the sir."

Michael forced a smile. "Thank you."

"Did you catch that last maneuver I did?"

"No, s—" he shook his head. "It happened too fast."

Granius looked to Joran. “You didn’t broach katas with him?”

“We only trained one hour a day, Praetor. I didn’t think he was ready.”

Granius nodded and studied Michael. “That’s possible, but something tells me this man will surprise you, legionnaire. Are you interested in trying, Michael?”

“It’d be my pleasure, s—” Michael cursed himself silently. “It would be my pleasure, Granius.”

Granius beamed. “What I did was a parry-thrust kata. Basically, a kata is a combination of moves. In this case, a parry paired with a thrust. The more skilled you are, the more moves you can pair. I’ve seen masters who can take a man down before anyone realizes an attack happened.”

“You?” Michael asked.

Granius laughed. “Hardly. On a very good day, I can manage a five move kata. I can hurt my opponent, but everyone watching will see the fight happening. As you can imagine, at its core, a kata is simple. Attack me slowly, so I can explain as I move.”

Michael thrust.

“I parry, and twist my sword to get yours out of the way, so I can then thrust at you.” Granius stopped with the tip at Michael’s chest. “Try it. We’ll go slow.” Granius slashed at Micheal who parried but diverted his sword away from Granius’ body in the process. They went again, and again, and again, each time Micheal did the kata successfully, Granius picked up speed.

You have learned a Kata

Parry-Thrust, One-Handed Sword

level 1

The notification surprised him and resulted in Granius’ sword slicing his hand. Michael let out a string of curses that surprised him as he stepped around and glared at the red bar and the few percents he taken in damages. How dare it count that when it was the notification that had caused him to falter.

“Are you alright, Michael?” Granius asked, looking expectant

“Yeah. It’s nothing big, just surprised me.”

The man nodded. “It’ll happen when learning.” He looked up, the sun had moved close to the roof of the buildings. “It’s probably a good time to stop for now.” The Praetor looked at Michael for a few seconds. “Tell me, Michael Vladmyr Rostov, would you want to be one of Cosconius’ protectors?”

Quest	Protect Cosconius	Type	Path
<p>You have been offered to become one of the protectors of Cosconius’ by Praetor Granius. As such you will be expected to work toward ensuring that all its citizens are protecting against monsters and other invading forces.</p> <p>Warning, Path types quests are comprised of an unknown sequences of quests, some of which will automatically be accepted if you accept this one. Once accepted, this quest</p>			

can not be abandoned.
Warning, you can only have on Path type quests.
Will you help protect Cosconius?

“Yes, Sir,” Michael answered without hesitation, offering his hand.
Smiling the Praetor grasped his forearm. “Then let me welcome you to the Cosconius army, Michael Vladmyr Rostov. I believe you will be able to accomplish great things with us. legionnaire, see to it Michael is settled in with your unit. Michael, I’ll see you here at the second hour after sunrise.”

Quest	Protect Cosconius 1, Train	Type	Path, Continuation
As part of being a legionnaire and protecting Cosconius, you are expected to train and improve.			
This quest is automatically accepted.			

“Praetor,” Hostus said, “you have duties to the city.”
With a theatrical sigh and roll of the eyes that made Michael smile, Granius turned. “And when will I be done with those?”
“If you focus on them, we should be done by zenith.”
“Then I’ll see you an hour after zenith. legionnaire, I’m putting you in charge of helping Michael integrate within your unit. They’ve traveled with him so they know his experience and they shouldn’t find reasons to complain.”
“No, Praetor, the others will be honored to have Michael with us.”
“Good, then proceed to the baths, Michael reeks.” Granius grinned. “As do I, but I’m Praetor, no one will dare point that out.”
“No Worries, sir,” Hostus said in a put upon tone, “I’ll see to it you are bathed, it is why you keep me around after all.”
“I’ll see you tomorrow Michael,” Granius said before leaving.
“We’ll stop by the barracks first, you can get out of that armor and put on actual clothing before we head to the baths.”
“I don’t have any clothing,” Michael said.
“There will be some at the barracks, no need to worry, clothing is one thing there is always more than we need of.”
Michael readied himself as he followed Joran and called up his Marshal skills.

Marshal Skills		Category level 9
Bashing, Medium Shield	17 (base 15, plus bonus)	
Bashing, Small Shield	5 (base 4, plus bonus)	
Blocking, Brawling	17 (base 15, plus bonus)	
Blocking, Medium Shield	17 (base 15, plus bonus)	
Blocking, Small Shield	5 (base 3, plus bonus)	
Dodging	17 (base 15, plus bonus)	

Kicking	3 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Leadership	2 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Parry, Knife	3 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Parry, One-Handed Sword	17 (base 15, plus bonus)	
Punching, Brawling	17 (base 15, plus bonus)	
Slashing, Knife	3 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Slashing, One-Handed Sword	17 (base 15, plus bonus)	
Thrust, Knife	3 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Thrust, One-Handed Sword	17 (base 15, plus bonus)	
Kata		Category level 1
Parry-Thrust, One-Handed Sword	3 (base 1, plus bonus)	

As he expected, even though he'd just gained it, his kata was level three. Those two bonus points applied automatically. He focused on the kata category itself and received an explanation of what it was.

Katas are the joining of multiple skills together in one maneuver. Katas become available at level ten in physical marshal skills. Skills must be at a minimum of level ten to be used in a kata. Each ten levels in the category allows for an additional move to be added to a kata.

Each skill involved must be at a minimum; numbers of moves in the kata, minus one, times ten. Incorporating a move from another type of weapons adds another ten level to this requirement.

So he'd have to bring all skills to twenty if he wanted to add a third one, or if he wanted to train something involving a sword and something else. Could he do something with a sword and his shield? He'd have to see.

He'd followed Joran inside a building at this point and had no idea how they'd gotten there, so he decided he'd stop thinking about what he could do, and just enjoy the rest of the evening.

A Cosconian month was thirty-six days, Michael learned and thirteen of them made a year, he was told. For thirty-nine days, Michael was back in training, and he loved it.

He trained primarily with his squad, his Contubernium, as Joran called it. With the two of them were Lierin, Pompeia, and Octacilia, three women, and while Michael might have had reservations about them serving in the army, going toe to toe with each of them disabused him of the idea women were physically inferior when it came to combat.

Faust, Galio, and Caius rounded out their Contubernium, with Shum, being their training officer. Their Decanus.

Except for Lierin and Shum, everyone in his unit was clearly human. Lierin was taller, thinner, and her ears were elongated, the tip pointed. Michael realized she reminded him of Vulcans, from Star Trek. Joran said she was half-elven, on her mother's side. The term sounded familiar, Michael guessed it was from overhearing his army buddies talk about their Dungeons and Dragons games again.

The Elven Empire was to the north, far, far to the north, Joran told him, but a few times a year one of their trade caravans visited the city. Occasionally one of them would stay behind and start a family here. Lierin was from such, although she didn't talk about her parents. As skilled as she was with the sword, she was deadlier with the bow. Her eyesight was like nothing Michael had seen, she could hit targets further than he thought he could manage with his old M16 and a scope. Not to mention that she could let loose half a dozen arrows faster than he could see.

Shum looked like Rogs, although he was taller and more muscular and his teeth were crooked in different directions. He was a half-orc, also on his mother's side. Shum wasn't a man who smiled, but he liked to talk when he wasn't pushing them to fight harder. Orcs had no organized rulers beyond the tribe chief and they were nomads. Shum's mother had wandered near the city when it was no more than a town, and Granius had fought them with the militia he'd put together. One soldier had impressed her so much that she took him as her husband and stayed long enough to give him a son. Shum still saw her every few years when the tribe she now led tested the Cosconian borders. The half-orc spoke of his mother testing the borders like his army buddies talked about playing cards.

Or, how Joran spoke of playing dice. His army buddies had stopped being such when he'd been dishonorably discharged, those who had survived Carpenter's betrayal at least. His friends were legionnaires now, like him.

He played dice with Joran, Faust, and Otacilai along with legionnaires from other Contubernium. He didn't care for the game itself, six dices thrown, and each betting on the total, but it was an opportunity to socialize. Through the game, Michael learned about the currency used in the city. The copper sestus was the lowest denomination. As a legionnaire, he was paid ten sestus for a nine-day week, and those would feed and find him lodging for the week if he didn't mind surviving on dried meat and sleeping in a stable. Fortunately for him, the barracks had better beds and food than that.

After copper came the iron silaq, the silver folls, and gold aurus. There were others beyond them, but no soldier saw enough coin to ever have one of the platinum tremiss. The ratio was set as one hundred to one for each of the coins. So without spending anything, it was ten weeks to get a silaq, a hundred for a folls, a thousand weeks for one aurus, and a hundred thousand for a tremiss.

How likely was it any of them would even see a folls?

Except for Joran, he ruled at dice and usually left a game with four times what he'd entered it with. Lierin was a reader, enjoying history over the made-up stories she claimed were currently popular. Faust worked leather in his spare time, Caius had aspirations of becoming a battle mage, so spent his time practicing his fire magic.

Pompeia liked men, a lot, she had a new story to tell them each morning over breakfast. Galio sewed and Octacilia was a mapmaker. Shum spent all his free time training in preparation for his mother's next visit.

After eight days of training they had a day of rest, and instead of leaving Michael brought him home to his family, his wife and two child, a son, Titus who was eight, and a daughter, Helvetia, who was two. Michael was able to last through the meal, Joran's family reminding him too much of the times with his daughter and then wife, of what he'd lost.

He stepped outside as soon as the meal was over and sat on the bench at the back of the house looking up.

"Are you alright?" Joran asked.

Michael shook his head. "Sorry for bailing like that, it was just too much." Joran nodded and sat silently next to him. "I had a family too," Michael said.

The man looked at him before speaking, when he did it was tentative. "You had to leave them behind?"

Michael shook his head, the image of Lisanne storming off, carrying Mary in her arms. "My ex-wife took my daughter with her when she left me."

"She left you? Didn't she love you? Hadn't she made a commitment to you?"

"Yes to the second." Michael looked at the stars and peered into his memories of his time with her. Had there been love there? "I don't know about the first."

"Did you love her?"

Michael opened his mouth, closed it and thought on that too. "I don't know," he finally admitted.

"If you weren't sure, why did you marry?"

He had to think about that too. "I was still single after my first tour, and my parents thought it was time. They introduced me to Lisanne, we were married a three years later."

"Your parents forced you to marry a woman you didn't love?"

"No, nothing like that, if me and Lisanne hadn't gotten along I'm sure they'd have found me someone else, but we did get along. We exchanged letters the entire time I was deployed. She's smart, funny, has a good head on her shoulder. I figured we were a decent match, so while on leave we got married. I found out she was pregnant with Mary four months into my third deployment. She gave birth four months later. I couldn't be there, but I took a leave as soon as I could and stayed home for a year, then had to go back. My fourth deployment was going to my last, I was going to aim to become an officer after that, it would give me more time with Mary. Carpenter happened a year into that, I was sent home and things went to hell."

"I am sorry Michael."

"The crazy thing is that I don't give a damn about Lisanne walking out on me. I signed those divorce papers without hesitation. It's that she wouldn't let me see Mary that really hurt."

"If you'd stayed, would you have been able to get your daughter back?"

Michael remembered the feel of the Colt Government in his hand looking down the barrel as the phone ran. “No,” he said. “I wasn’t getting Mary back. I thought coming here, restarting would let me put all that behind me forever, but you and your family reminded me I left my daughter behind.” He let out a breath. “And I can’t help wondering what will happen to her.”

“If she’s anything like you, she’ll grow up to be a fighter and she’ll help others.” Joran stood. “I’m heading back inside before I’m missed. Will you be long before coming also?”

Michael didn’t at the man. “I won’t come back in. I want to thank you for the mean and the company, but I’m not ready to be around a happy family just yet. I’ll sit here for a while longer then head back to the barrack.”

“Very well, Michael. Thank you for the company and when you are ready, my family will always welcome you as one of us.” The man headed inside.

A few minutes later his son sat next to Michael and pointed to the stars, named the a few constellations. Michael thanks him and left before his presence became to painful. That night was filled with dreams for raising his daughter, watching her marry. Of living a long happy life with Lisanne. The next morning he woke feeling barely rested and threw himself into his training.

Halfway through the second week of training, Michael finally reached the point where he no longer felt like he’d died at the end of the day, after he’d added an extra ten points in his endurance. Being able to do more than fall in his bed, he took to walking around the city with Octacilia and learning the layout. Walking around the blocks was simple, it was all straight lines north-south and east-west. It was once within the blocks that things became complicated. The lanes and alleys went everywhere. It looked like the buildings had been build without thought to them, other than making sure they had a small yard and didn’t touch. In some places, that meant he could only slip a hand between buildings. By the end of the month, he had enough of a sense of the city he could avoid getting lost.

The rest of the time was spent training, Joran did not invite him to his home again, and Michael was grateful.

That meant getting up with the sun every morning, putting on his chainmail armor, going for an hour-long run around the city, getting out of the armor and into a hard leather one, having breakfast, training with, and without, his sword and shield under Shum’s supervision. Granius trained with him for an hour each day, focusing on Katas, first the Parry-thrust one, then showing him a second one consisting of a double thrust, then combining the two in a three-move kata of a Parry and two thrusts.

Once Hostus pulled Granius back to his duties, Michael went back to training with his unit until it was time for dinner and then rest.

* * * * *

Michael followed Hostus through the marble halls of the house of leadership, where Granius spent most of his time directing the progress of the city. Too much time, Granius liked to say while they trained. He barely had any left to train with the soldiers

once he was done telling this quarry leader what they needed, or that crafter how many houses needed to be added to the city to deal with the growing population.

“I so regret taking on the task of making Novus Roma a gem of a city,” he’d say, in a sarcastic tone and with a grin.

“Michael!” Granius called to him when Hostus opened the double doors to a large room. The Praetor stood by a table with four generals. “Come, come.” He motioned and Michael moved to the table, standing at attention.

“You wanted to see me, Praetor?”

Granius rolled his eyes but didn’t chastise Michael.

“Yes. How do you feel your training is going?”

“I…” Michael looked that the generals studying him. “Shum seems pleased with my progress, sir.”

“Good, Good.” Granius waved a hand over the table and the image of a map appeared. Micheal’s eyes went wide, and even wider when he realized the image was three dimensional and as photo-realistic as anything he’d ever seen. Even the science fiction movies didn’t manage anything this real.

Granius shrugged when Micheal stared at him. “I dabble.”

Michael nodded and had a sense this was more than dabbling. He forced the surprise aside and studied the map. In the center was a city, which he suspected was Novus Roma. Four spots were equidistant from it at the cardinal points.

“Watchtowers,” Granius said when Michael pointed to one. “Those are the first ones from when I began expanding the territory. They’re one passus away. Once I secured the area, the next ones were built three passus away.” The Praetor indicated the circle of twelve points on the map.

One passus was a five thousand paces, which was just that, the length of a step, although everyone carried a length of rope of the official length of the pace, which he approximated to be two-and-a-half feet long.

The next ring had eighteen outposts, and was twice as distant, with another ring twice then and four more following the same doubling in distance. That made it the territory what? Something over five hundred passus in radius? A thousand miles? Michael let out a whistle.

“I don’t control the largest territory,” Granius said, “but for the population I have. It is impressive.”

“Do the elves have the largest?”

“The dwarves. They control most of the east, all the way to the edge of the elven lands to the north, and the unlivable ones to their south. A desert,” Granius explained. “No one knows how far it extends. The west if mostly unexplored until you reach the Kingdom of Richard.”

“Lionheart?” Michael asked, studying the map.

“I don’t know that the old king had a moniker. Is that where you’re from?”

Michael shook his head. “Sorry. Richard Lionheart is a character in stories I remember from my youth. A king, so my mind just jumped to that.”

“Well, you’d have to travel for over a year on horseback to reach their borders, but halfway there you’ll start encountering city-states that rival Novus Roma. Korinth is bigger, but not much of a military force. It’s mostly merchants, with mercenary protecting the city.”

“So a city you’ll incorporate?”

Granius chuckled. “It will be a long time before I can extend my borders that far.” He looked at the map and when he continued, he was pensive. “I’ve seen what overextending your forces can do. I’m not interested in doing that.” He shook himself and smiled. “But that isn’t what I called you here for.” With a wave of the hand, the image changed and showed a forest with a mountain behind it. If the orientation hadn’t changed, this was to the north-west.

“That’s the edge of my territory, and there’s been an incursion of Gnolls that I’d like you to go stop.”

“Me?” Michael looked at the generals, then Granius. “Sir, isn’t there an outpost closer? Wouldn’t it make more sense for you to dispatch them to handle this?” The map zoomed out until an outpost became visible. Michael had no idea the distances involved without an index.

“If this was solely about removing the incursion, you’d be correct, but I think it’s time to see what you can do in the field.”

“Sir, will all due respect, I’ve only been training for a month. There’s no way I can take on however many of the monsters that are there.”

Granius smiled. “And in that month, you’ve made more progress than most recruits do in a few years. Whatever training you received before coming here served you well.”

Michael knew he was learning faster than most, but there was no way Granius could be serious.

The Praetor chuckled. “Stop worrying, I’m not sending you alone. Your Contubernium is going with you, as well as two more.”

“But it’s going to take us a month to get there, aren’t they going to have spread everywhere by then?”

“Gnolls aren’t adventurous,” one of the generals said. She indicated the forest. “They’re going to settle in there, look for caves, hollows, anything they can hide in. They’ll venture out to test the forces we have there, but it’ll be some time before they have the numbers to mount an assault on the outpost. They need to do that before they can risk one of the villages.”

“Fortunately, no one had settled that area before the outpost was built,” Granius said, “Unlike with the town you were at. I keep settlements away from the edge of my territory to avoid what happened there. As Dranik said, it’ll take them time before they are ready to attack.”

“But hasn’t it already been a month? That’s how long it took for a scout to come back, right?”

“It took two days for a messenger bird to fly here,” Granius said. “More efficient

than runners.”

Michael nodded. A four-day delay in communication wasn't as horrible as eighty days between sending a report and receiving orders, but a lot could happen in four days. This was so different than the battlefield he was used to. Hours was what he expected when he made a report, and that was because the people in charge couldn't make instantaneous decisions.

He straightened. “Sir, I don't think I'm the right person for this.”

The Praetor studied Michael, his expression losing some of the humor it had held. He looked at the generals, who left them. “Michael,” he said once it was only the two of them at the table. “I'm not sure you understand what I'm offering you here.”

“I do, sir. But I think that the success of an operation like this is more important than me proving myself to you and failing.”

“It's just us, Michael, please stop it with the ‘sir’.” Granius looked at the map. “I understand how you feel. I had to start somewhere too, and it's scary, but I don't think you understand that you're special, Michael.”

“S—Granius, I'm just a soldier, one who didn't learn anything like this.”

Granius smiled. “I'm just a soldier too. Or it's what I like to tell myself when all this starts to overwhelm me. But I'm also Praetor of Novus Roma, of all of Cosconius. These people look to me to keep them safe. I want you to be one of the men I can send out and know he will take care of the problem for me. I'd go. If I wasn't tied here, I'd be there to deal with those monsters myself.”

“I'm not some...” he searched for the word, superman was what he wanted, but he didn't think Granius would know what he meant.

“Hero?” the Praetor offered.

Michael nodded. “I can handle a sword and a shield. You have men and women how can do magic. Wouldn't they be better?”

Granius walked around the table and placed his hands on each of Michael's shoulder, looking him into the eyes. “Michael, look inside you, there's more to you than your shield and your sword. You are a man who stepped into a fight with a horde of goblin not knowing what to expect. Who stayed until he was nearly dead. The report said that you didn't even move from where you stood once the arrows started flying. You had to be dragged to safety. You may not want to see yourself as a hero, Michael, and I like that about you, but you are one. I need you to do this. I need you to take your Contubernium and go to the outpost to deal with those gnolls. I need you to trust that you are the hero I see, even if you don't see him.”

Quest	Protect the territory	Type	Situational
Praetor Granius Sepurcius as called on you to help protect his territory by traveling to the furthest outpost and removing a band of Gnolls before they become a problem.			
Will you take on the quest Granius has offered you?			

Michael nodded in spite of not feeling any of the confidence Granius showed. “I

will.”

* * * * *

“Sir,” one of the civilians from support troupe called to Michael. “We’re running low on meat and vegetables.”

Michael rubbed the bridge of his nose. Why did they always have to come to him with that? Couldn’t they just take care of it? They knew who their hunters and foragers were as well as he did.

“I’ll see to it,” Michael answered, still uncertain how he’d ended up with everyone coming to him to make decisions even after eighteen days of traveling. He located the two hunters and two foragers and instructed them to coordinate with the cooks to see how much they needed to gather.

You have gained a level
Leadership

level 10

Michael dismissed the message with an annoyed swipe of the hand. At least those notifications came less and less as they went up in level. He could go days now without one of them appearing, not that he did much more than direct people. He’d hoped to get some training in, during the trip, but there was always a problem for him to deal with. It was as if they’d all decided he was the commanding officer, despite being the least experienced legionnaire here.

“It’s the Praetor’s aura,” Pompeia said later, as they ate. The meat was roasted and dry, they wouldn’t eat the result of today’s hunt for a few days, and by then, the meat would be as dry and tough as this. “Everyone knows he’d taken a liking to you, so they defer to you now.”

“But I’m just another legionnaire,” Michael protest, which caused the others around the fire to chuckle.

“Who can learn magic with a few hours practice,” Caius replied. “Has matched us with the sword in only a few weeks. Of course, you’re just another legionnaire. You and a dozen more like you and we’d be taking on the Elven Empire.”

“Two dozen,” Lierin said, “don’t underestimate the Empire’s might.”

Octacialia waved the half-elf’s concern aside. “This is Michael, by the time we reached the Empire he’d be a master mage, an alchemist, a crafter, and a blacksmith.”

“I think you’re piling it on a little thick, Octa.”

“Oh, no, you’ll be in all the books Lierin reads by the time we get back.”

“He won’t,” she replied, “not unless he’s behind the rise of the Dwarven Realm a thousand years ago.” She looked at Michael expectantly.

“Two months ago I didn’t even know there was a Dwarven Realm.”

“That’s what a secret hero of the world would say,” Joran commented, cleaning his bowl if the rest of his bread.

Michael eyes him. “You saved my life back in Windfall, I don’t think a ‘hero of the world’ would need that.”

“If he wanted to remain secret he’d have to,” Galio said.

Michael looked at them. “You know what, you people aren’t my friends anymore, I was hoping for support from you, not to turn me into this hero I’ve never known about.”

“Just ask Lierin,” Joran said, “she’ll be happy to tell you all about who you’ve been.”

Grumbling about the worthiness, and lack of, of anyone claiming to be his friends Michael finished his food.

* * * * *

The top of outpost’s watchtower was visible when they made camp, Ocacilia said that they’d be there before the zenith on the next day. After eating, Michael found a quiet place to be by himself and did the one thing he’d put off until then. *Look within yourself*, Granius had told him when he’d accepted this quest. That phrase took on an entirely new meaning when there was something to actually look at.

With a sigh, he called up his character sheet.

Name	Michael Vladmyr Rostov	
Level	24	
Race	Human	
Age	32	
Aging speed	37.88	
	Statistics	
Strength	41	(base 34, plus bonus)
Agility	39	(base 32, plus bonus)
Intelligence	11	
Endurance	45	
Wisdom	10	
Statistic Points to distribute	33	
Faith		
Hit Points	350	out of 350
Stamina Points	391	out of 391
Essence Points	111	out of 111
	Traits	
Facility with Numbers	Level 1	
Language(spoken) Cosconian	Static	
Panic Attacks	Static	
Trait points to distribute	24	
	Skills	
Marshal Skills		Category level 17
Bashing, Medium Shield	38	(base 34, plus bonus)
Bashing, Small Shield	8	(base 4, plus bonus)
Blocking, Brawling	38	(base 34, plus bonus)

Blocking, Medium Shield	38 (base 34, plus bonus)	
Blocking, Small Shield	7 (base 3, plus bonus)	
Dodging	38 (base 34, plus bonus)	
Kata (one-handed sword, parry-thrust)	5 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Kicking	5 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Leadership	12 (base 10, plus bonus)	
Parry, Knife	5 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Parry, One-Handed Sword	38 (base 34, plus bonus)	
Punching, Brawling	38 (base 34, plus bonus)	
Slashing, Knife	5 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Slashing, One-Handed Sword	38 (base 34, plus bonus)	
Thrust, Knife	5 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Thrust, One-Handed Sword	38 (base 34, plus bonus)	
Kata		Category level 14
Parry-Thrust, One-Handed Sword	29 (base 25, plus bonus)	
Thrust-Thrust, One-Handed Sword	25 (base 21, plus bonus)	
Parry-Thrust-Thrust, One-Handed Sword	21 (base 17, plus bonus)	
Athletic Skills		Category level 1
Jumping	3 (base 1, plus bonus)	
Running	35 (base 31, plus bonus)	
Spells		
Fire		Category level 1
Flame	8 (base 7, plus bonus)	
Water		Category level 1
Condense	8 (base 7, plus bonus)	

Without anyone to compare it with, his level meant little other than indicating how far he'd progressed from level one, but he also didn't know what the upper limit was, or if there was one. His aging worried him, if it meant he aged at one third the speed of anyone else, he'd stay young while everyone around him withered away. Would he have to leave before that became noticeable?

His stats were a little simpler to understand, He'd confirmed he was much stronger than he looked, as well as stronger than most legionnaires, even Shum, who looked massive. Without numbered weight, he couldn't tell if he was four times stronger than he'd been before, but he'd picked up an anvil without straining himself. His agility and endurance were tougher to test, although he could definitely run longer and harder than before.

The faith statistic baffled him a little, it had no numbers attached to it, which could be a reflection of his lack of any faith. The battlefield either made faithful of

soldiers or destroyed it utterly. He's seen too much horrible stuff, had done too much of it himself to believe any god would allow people to do such things.

His traits were also self-explanatory, and the fact he could increase his facility with numbers was interesting, he could turn himself into some sort of genius with numbers, not that he expected it would do him much good here.

His marshal skills were all high, from the month-long training, but comments from his friends made him wonder if he should find other things to do. Or, if he was going to be as long-lived as he suspected, he could wait until later.

His spells, well, he'd barely gotten to practice them, other than lighting a fire here and there or taking a handful of water. He kept meaning to set aside time to practice, but distractions kept coming up.

He snapped his finger and a flame appeared over it.

You have gained a level

Flame

level 8

Of course, he'd been that close.

He took a branch and stared at its tip. He felt the heat coming from it, then snapped his fingers. The flame appeared at the end of his thumb, again. He shook it off. He'd have to ask another of the legionnaire for their technique and see if that one worked for him. Not that any he'd talked with had begun by summoning a flame at his finger instead of a fire pit.

He got up and rejoined the others. He had a sense that starting tomorrow, he wouldn't get much time to relax and enjoy his friends' company.

The map depicting the surrounding area was roughly drawn, charcoal on the back of tanned animal hide.

"The Gnolls are about a passus in the forest," Calvisia said, placing her finger within the drawn borders of the forest. She was the outpost leader; a rough looking woman, muscular with dark tanned skin, serious eyes and an inability to smile, Michael had decided. "The scouts counted around a hundred and fifty. We had a few skirmishes with their scouts over the last week. Your timing is good, they look settled in, which means they might start advancing."

Michael wasn't familiar with forest combat, his only experience dated back to training exercises. "What's their camp set up like?"

She unrolled another skin showing another rough map. "They're set up in a clearing; tents, untended fires, only one or two with roasting animals. Sentries walking the camp's perimeter."

"What's their support personnel like within the camp?"

The outpost leader raised an eyebrow that almost reached her short copper hair. "They're Gnolls, they aren't civilized. They hunt their own food, cook it themselves when they bother doing that. If you die in a battle against them, they'll eat you." She

smiled and it was Michael's turn to raise an eyebrow. "So best not die."

Michael nodded and focused on the map, closing and opening his hands to keep them from shaking. He had eight Contubernium at his disposal, only four of which had seen serious fighting, his and the three other he'd brought. The outposts were where the recruits went to get experience fighting monsters, and until the Gnolls, what they'd encountered had been nothing more than animals Michael wouldn't consider threats, if not for the fact they were four or five times the size of a man.

Could he do this on his own? He was stronger than the others, learned faster. Could he take on a hundred and fifty of those creatures by himself, therefore avoid putting any of the men and women under his command in danger?

And if you had your Colt Government, Michael, could you survive putting it in your mouth and pulling the trigger? He wasn't Superman, he also wasn't a hero. But more than that, he'd chosen to live when he accepted this second chance. Trying to do this alone was committing suicide.

He let out his breath. "How do Gnolls think?" he asked, which got him another raised eyebrow. "We don't have them where I'm from."

"You won't get them to talk philosophy if that's what you're planning," Calvisia said.

"If we take out their leader, will they run away? Would they follow whoever killed him?" Michael asked.

"They're loyal," she said. "But only to their kind. You kill their war leader and they will rip you apart."

As well as any unit he took with him.

He grabbed hold of the table's edge. Now was not the time to lose it. "How many archers do we have? If we draw them out of the forest, can they take them down?"

"I have eleven archers," she answered. "This region isn't good for training them. I have two scores of arrows, we'd have to draw them out in small groups to have any chance of killing them before they overwhelmed the archers. Only two of them have combat experience."

Michael nodded and forced a smile. "Now that I've demonstrated this isn't the sort of terrain I'm used to fighting in, what do you recommend?"

"I'd recommend half Contubernium size groups spread around their camp," she replied. "They scout in teams of three to four Gnolls."

"Could four recruits take on one scout team?"

She shook her head. "Only with the gods guiding their swords." He should leave them behind, keep them safe, but this was why they were here, wasn't it? To see combat. "We counted a minimum of four teams roaming the forest at all times, but they often send out more; looking for our scouts."

At least a dozen of those monsters he didn't even know the capability of. Michael closed his eyes, did his best to control his breathing. He had no business being here. Let alone being the one in charge.

"Sir?" She asked.

Except Granius had put him in charge; saw something in him. As terrified as he was, Michael didn't want to let the Praetor down. "Can we force them to scatter into the forest? Hopefully in small groups?" That had been a tactic, back home. Drop bombs on encampments to force the enemy soldiers to run, then take them in smaller groups. "Are there any combat mages here?"

She shook her head. "I have two practicing earth magic, one air, one water, and three fire, but they aren't advanced enough to have been accepted into any of the academies."

Michael looked around until he located his friend. "Caius, how's your fire magic? Can you drop a fireball on the Gnoll camp?"

Caius shook his head. "No." He looked at the map of the Gnoll camp. "The best I could do is make some of the fires flash if I'm close enough."

"Can you teach the other fire mages how to do it?" Michael asked.

"If they're advanced enough," Caius answered, "but I doubt they're like you. It would take them weeks of training before they could do it with anything resembling reliability. Michael has a talent with magic he refuses to practice," the man said to Calvisia. "He managed to create a flame a few minutes after being explained how."

"It was over an hour," Michael corrected, "and even after months, I still can't get a fire to light directly." He snapped his fingers, with the flame appearing at his thumb, as a demonstration.

Caius shrugged. "If he'd decided to become a combat mage, I've no doubt he could ignite the entire forest by now."

Michael glared at the man. "There are innocent animals in there. Our only enemies are the gnolls. And I'm a soldier, not a mage."

"You could be."

Michael shook his head. "How many fires can you flash at one time?"

"It depends on how close they are. I can hit any fire within a dozen-pace, at around a hundred pace of me."

"That could serve as a distraction, attack while they're unbalanced." He doubted it would last long, but seconds made a difference in war. "What are the oil reserves like?" Michael asked, an idea forming.

"Adequate," Calvisia replied, watching him.

"How about bottles? Containers that can be sealed?"

"I'd have to check with the cooks."

"What are you thinking, Michael?" Caius asked.

"We don't have fire mages where I'm from. But people have come up with equivalent. Fill a bottle with oil, put a piece of cloth in it, seal it, light the cloth, and throw it. When it breaks the oil catches on fire. If you hit one of the Gnoll with it, he'll be too busy trying not to burn to attack." Michael paused. "Gnolls can burn, right?"

Caius looked at Michael. "Of course they can burn, it's not like they are dragons."

Michael nodded, stopped, and stared at the man. "You guys have dragons?"

"Sir," the outpost leader said, preventing Caius from replying. "forgive me, but

I'm confused. You were angry at the idea you might set fire to the forest, but you want to throw burning oil at the Gnolls."

Michael considered ignoring the comment to get information on dragons, but this was a combat situation. "As a distraction. To scatter the others."

"And what happens when a Gnoll on fire runs into the forest?"

"Or if some of the burning oil splashes into the trees?" Caius asked. "I don't know if four fire mages without academy qualification could contain all the fires that would spread."

Michael hung his head. "Right. Trees burn."

"Where did you use such tactics?" Calvisia asked.

"It was our enemies who use them," Michael replied. "In cities and the desert."

"You're from the desert?" she asked.

"No, I'm from Michigan," Michael answered. "I just fought in the desert." Her wide eyes reminded him of Granius' comment about the desert, and how nothing about it was known. "Not the one here." He couldn't recall what direction it was in. "It's nowhere near here."

She looked at him, suspicion crossing her face.

"The Praetor has met him," Joran said, "handled part of his training. He assigned him to lead us."

She nodded, the comment calming her, but confusing Michael. "What was that about?"

The three of them exchanged a look.

"There are things out there," Joran said.

"Monsters," Michael commented, indicating the map.

"Not always. More like things pretending to be people," Caius said.

"Some just appear, pretend to be lost, then kill and destroy everything, until some hero comes and kills them."

"Stories are the Praetor fought such a thing years ago," Joran said. "When the city was still a village."

"Is that why you wanted me to meet him?" Michael asked. "I did just wander into the village as it was attacked."

Joran chuckled. "Such a thing would have joined the goblins, not held them off to the point of dying. You're a hero, Michael, not an Outlander."

Caius nodded. "The Praetor would have destroyed you if he determined you were such a thing."

The outpost leader indicated the map. "Maybe we should focus on these monsters if the Praetor has exonerated you."

Michael nodded, happy to have something else to think about. "Alright, so we need to draw them out, but not burn down the forest." He looked around. "Any suggestions?"

"Let them do the work for us?" Joran said.

* * * * *

Michael stopped his run, turned, planted his feet, put his shoulder to his shield, and readied himself for the impact. The Gnoll smashed against it and Michael slid back; but the Gnoll staggered, dazed.

The monsters reminded Michael of hyenas standing on their rear legs. They wore clothing of skins and furs. And some were armed with clubs, or stone sword, as was the one before him, shaking its head to clear it. Michael swung his sword at it while three other legionnaires stepped out from behind trees to take on the other two Gnolls.

Michael took down the warrior, earning a handful of cuts. The stone sword was sharper than it had any rights to be. His legionnaire recruits cut down the other two while Michael remained ready to jump in if they looked like they were losing the advantage. They didn't need him. Their training had been good, even if they lacked field experience.

This was what had been agreed upon, a mix of experienced legionnaires along with recruits. Since the scout parties were only three to four Gnoll strong, with only the occasional one having a stronger warrior in the lead like this one, the outpost leader had decided it was a perfect way to give the recruits experience.

His three recruits cheered, and Michael smiled. "Pile them up, bandage your wounds, and let's find another scouting party for me to pull." He set about bandaging his own cuts, watching his bleeding debuffs disappear each time.

You have gained a level
First Aid

level 4

This was their fourth party of the day and the sun was halfway to the horizon. Michael couldn't get a clear sense time the way the others did by looking at the shadows, but he figured they had a few hours before it became too dark and the Gnolls gained the advantage since they saw in the dark the way cats did.

Joran's idea had been to simply let the gnolls do their patrols as usual. Since they didn't pay attention to how many of them roamed the forest, the hope was they wouldn't notice when few of them returned.

It took around an hour for one of the recruits with aspirations of becoming a tracker to find another trail. From there, Michael continued alone, being the quietest of them, somehow. Simply by paying attention to where he'd stepped he'd received a notification he'd gained Stealth as a skill. He didn't like that it was a thief skill, but the category had remained level one even if the skill itself was now thirteen, with that unknown bonus that seemed to affect all his skills.

He couldn't tell if it was because they were young, and lacked the focus Michael had gained through years of military training, or something else, something that had to do with how he'd come to this world, but he did pick up skills much easier than the others.

He tried to show his recruits how he did it. This had earned him a few points in teaching, but he had difficulty articulating what seemed to be instinctive for him to know, and he'd given up.

He heard the noise of the Gnolls and stopped. Searching for them through the trees.

You have gained a level	
Perception	level 5

He spotted the motion, brown against brown, He stepped closer, a group of four, but this one had two of the larger warriors. Could he take them on by himself? The warriors were tough, but he knew he was stronger. It would be interesting to test himself.

But should he? The plan was also to give his recruits experience.

He banged his sword on his shield to alert the Gnolls to his presence, and his recruits that he was about to return with company. Once they saw him, Michael turned and ran noisily until he just past his hiding recruits. He turned and readied himself for the Gnolls, but looked over his shield when the impact didn't come.

The Gnolls stood twenty feet away, the one in the lead sniffing the air as he kept the rest from passing him. It snarled and growled something, nodding to the trees on their left and right, where his recruits were hiding. It pulled the two swords at its belt.

“Wait until I've engaged them,” Michael said, “I'll try to scatter them and take on the leader. Work together, focus on taking one down and covering each other.” He ran at the Gnolls, blocking the lead one's double swing and shouldering him away. He slashed at the other warrior and scouts, forcing them away from one another before turning to face the leader.

Michael ran at the Gnoll charging him, taking the two swords on his shield again, but this time the force of the blows sent Michael down to his knees. He threw himself aside to avoid the next swing and rolled to his feet before the Gnoll turned to face him.

Michael parried one sword, twisting his to cut his opponent.

You have learned a Kata	
Parry-Slash, One-Handed Sword	level 1

The Gnoll did his own maneuver as Michael deflected the other sword with his shield, sliding it down along it, and hooking it under the shield to cut Michael's leg. His hit point bar dropped by something like ten percent, more than any one hit had ever done.

With a curse, Michael stepped back. The Gnoll sniffed the blood on his sword and bared his teeth in what Michael thought was a grin. Michael glared back. He wasn't letting some monster kill him, no matter how strong it might be.

He closed the distance, deflecting one sword with his shield, taking the other through his side, and swung as hard as he could at his enemy, cutting him in half from the shoulder to the opposite hip.

Michael lost his balance and stifled a scream as the sword twisted when he hit the ground. His hit point bar was down to one third and dropped a little more as he pulled

the sword out.

A scream drew his attention. One of the recruits was down, alive, but with a bone poking out of his leg. Michael threw the sword at the Gnoll bringing a club down on the recruit. It hit the arm sideways, not doing any visible damage, but throwing the swung off. The recruit planted his sword in the Gnoll's stomach.

Michael got to his feet to help, but the last two Gnolls fell under his recruits' attacks before he hobbled to them. This time, the pride in their victory was marred by the amount of damage they'd all taken.

"Bandage up," Michael wheezed, pulling the chain mail off as carefully as he could. Another bleeding debuff appeared. He ripped his shirt into strips, and one of the recruits helped him bandage himself. Michael sighed in relief when the last of the debuffs vanished.

"Let's head back to camp. I think we've done enough." He slung his chain mail shirt over his shoulder and grabbed his shield. Once his recruits had made a splint for the injured man, they helped him walk away from the carnage.

They reached the outpost to the bustle of other returning legionnaires. Michael let his recruits continue ahead while he found an isolated area to get himself together. Those last four had been much stronger than he'd expected. He could have lost one of them. He should have seen it coming. He was in charge. He should have dealt with them by himself, he was stronger than his recruits. And if he died, it wasn't like anyone would miss him. Unlike them, he'd already cheated death once, he didn't need to—

"Michael," a rough voice called to him. Michael jumped, then groaned at the pain his side caused him. Astair was next to him, holding him up. He made a face at Michael's torn side before getting him to sit.

"No." Michael caught the cleric's hand before he placed it over his injuries. "Have you seen to everyone else?"

"You're the prefect, I need to see to you first."

"Do you have limits on how much you can heal?"

Astair's sunk-in face was unreadable. "Only the gods are without limits."

"Then see to the others. If you have any strength left afterward, come heal me. If not, I can wait until you're rested." He looked at his hit point bar. He only had one-fifth of it left, but it was holding steady. He'd see how much he healed overnight if Astair didn't heal him.

Then the consequences of doing that hit him. What if he healed it all? What would the others say?

"That is not how things are done," the cleric said, derailing Michael's panic, the debuff fading slightly. Maybe he should get healed, to ensure no one noticed.

"See to the others, Astair. If you haven't gotten to me by then, before I go to sleep you can use what you have left on me." Michael hung his head. "Right now, I need to be alone."

"Very well, prefect." Astair left him.

Why had he sent him away? Because he didn't want a witness to his breakdown. He cursed. No one had died. Cuts and a broken leg were all that had been suffered. He had no reason to feel like this.

Except he'd screwed up, again. He'd seen the force was stronger than before, and he still brought them for his recruits to deal with. As soon as he'd realized the Gnolls hadn't fallen for the ruse, he should have attacked, not just separated them, but killed as many as he could before his recruits joined in. It was his job to keep them alive.

He tried to pull his knees to himself, but the motion pulled on his side and the pain almost made him cry out. It did have the advantage of causing his panic debuff to start to fade away.

They were soldiers, Michael reminded himself. They might be green, but they knew the danger. His job was to make sure they came back as intact as possible under the circumstances, not to kill himself literally or figuratively over every injury they got. Men had died under his command before. It didn't affect him like this then.

He let out a shrill whistle to attract the attention of a legionnaire heading out of the outpost and got his help to stand. He couldn't stay alone. He'd just spiral down into another attack or depression. He needed to stay occupied.

He hobbled to the table where Calvisia was looking over maps and reports. Joran was next to her, looking over other papers.

"What's the result of the day?" Michael asked.

"We did well," she answered, looking up at him. "Each unit—" her eyes widened at his bloody side.

"Michael?" Joran gasped. He looked around.

"Don't call Astair," Michael stopped him. "I sent him to look after the others before he heals me."

"He needs to heal you," Joran said, "if you die we'll be without a commander."

"I'm not dying. Just cut up a little. It's not like I'll die of an infection within the next few hours. Do you know about infections?"

Joran gave him a disbelieving look. "Of course I know about infected wounds. We're not barbarians. You could be poisoned."

"I wouldn't have made it this far if I was." And he suspected he'd get a debuff icon for that too. "I told him to heal me before I go to sleep, so you don't have to worry. By morning I'll be good as new."

"It isn't good for morale to see a commanding officer injured," the outpost leader said.

"I think it's better for morale if they're not suffering." Michael motioned to the papers. "Now, what's the result of the day?"

She consulted tallies. "With your group, the current estimate is slightly under a hundred dead Gnolls."

"That means there's about fifty left in their camp," Joran said. "We should be able to take them without problems."

"Any casualties on our side?" Michael asked, wishing Joran didn't sound so

enthusiastic at the prospect of attacking them.

“Three dead.” She motioned and Michael looked in that direction. A group stood around something on the ground. A body, he suspected. They had mugs and were talking.

“What are they doing?”

“Remembering their friend.” Joran looked at Michael strangely. “Isn’t that something you do, where you’re from?”

“We don’t do it over the body.”

“Then how do they know you will remember them?”

Michael almost told his friends the dead didn’t hear anything, but he reminded himself he wasn’t on Earth. Maybe here they did listen. Magic was a thing. Maybe ghosts were too. He settled for a shrug and indicated the maps.

“Do we have enough legionnaires to surround their camp?”

“The clearing is fairly large. I don’t think we can create a noose that will catch every fleeing Gnoll.”

“Do we care if Gnolls flee?” Michael asked. “If they make it back where they came from, will they return with a stronger army?”

“There’s no way to know,” She answered. “We don’t know where they came from. We know very little about what is out there.” She searched through the maps, pulled one with hastily made marks on it. “One of the teams came across markers left on the path the Gnolls took to get here, it could be to trace their route back to where they came from.”

"Or more likely," Joran said, "for other to follow. An advanced party would have another one following."

"How far?" Michael asked. Joran shrugged. “Then I suggest we surround the clearing early in the morning, killing any remaining scout parties as we take position, once in place we attack as one. We’ll have the numbers and hopefully the element of surprise, and prevent any from running off to warn whoever is following.” Michael looked at the other two.

“Sounds reasonable to me,” Joran answered the look.

Calvisia looked at the map. “My only concern is that they know we’ve killed a lot of them, they might decide to move in the night.”

“Can we spare a few groups to keep an eye on them? Let us know in the morning if they moved?”

“I wouldn’t be comfortable losing more than two contuberniums to go up against fifty opponents,” the outpost leader said. “If you want them in teams of four, that is four teams.”

Michael considered the situation. They wouldn’t fight except in dire circumstances, but if they did have to fight, he couldn’t have them be too easy to pick off.

“Four teams will be enough, I think. All they’ll do is keep an eye on them, not engage anyone. I’ll leave you to decide who.”

“The rest of us should go eat,” Joran said, “and those who need it, get healed.”

The legionnaire looked pointedly at Michael.

“Once Astair is—”

The legionnaire grabbed Michael by the arm, making him yelp in pain, and dragged him to the cleric.

* * * * *

The Gnoll camp was nothing more than a collection of shelters made of furs stretched over a frame of angled branches, with more furs on the ground for them to sleep on. A quick look told him there were twenty-two with one larger shelter, that one almost a tent. That one would house the leader.

Michael was by himself; the clearing was large enough that it required everyone to be alone, which made him uncomfortable. Many of the legionnaires were green enough that even with the day of taking down the scouts, he didn't think they were ready for this attack without close support, but while they didn't mind if some Gnolls ran off, Calvisia had pointed out that if too many joined the other group they suspected was behind this one, it would make them tough to take on.

Even with the sun just cresting over the trees, the Gnolls were moving about, and while Michael knew nothing about them as people, he thought they were alert, weapons kept close at hand; and they all had weapons. Fifty-three Gnolls, each fit, muscular, and in hide armor, and definitely alert, he thought, as a few eyed the tree line warily. There could be more in the shelters he couldn't see into.

For some reasons, they had stayed camped here even after losing their scouts. Michael didn't like it. A force suffering these many losses should retreat; that they did went against what he knew of warfare. He still didn't like the odds, but they were in position and Granius had given them orders.

He let out a breath, quietly pulled the sword out of its sheath, unhooked the shield off his back and slipped it over his arm. When they'd discussed attack signals, they'd mentioned bird calls and a variety of animal cries, all of which left Michael baffled. It sunk in they had no way to talk over even short distances. He wished he could have brought a few radios. He also understood why they trained so hard to work as tight units. Unfortunately, the recruits didn't have much of that training.

So Michael decided he'd be the signal. Once he launched himself into the camp, the others were to attack. He would do as much damage by himself so the others had more of a chance to survive.

His nerves rattled. That voice at the back of his head began telling him all the ways in which this could go wrong. The damned panic icon even started manifesting. With a scream, he ran in the clearing slashing at one Gnoll, then another. He didn't aim to kill. His goal was to hurt as many of them before the other legionnaires joined in.

The yells of the others came after he'd injured twenty Gnolls. Far too few as far as Michael was concerned, but how a battle behaved was rarely in the hands of the combatants, he'd learned while in the army. This was when those who believed in god, or gods here, began to pray.

He just hoped really hard he wouldn't lose any recruits today.

Ten more injured Gnolls took him to his target, the larger tent, as four of the biggest, meanest Gnolls he'd seen to date stepped out. Michael stopped in his tracks and for a moment considered this had been a mistake. The smallest of the five was a head taller than Michael, holding a black stone sword and covered in sewed together leather armor.

You are now level 27

Michael ignored the message. He'd ponder how he'd gained a level while standing there later because the two on either side of that Gnoll had armor that incorporated chain mail into the leather, and held metal swords, not iron like his, something orangy. The fourth Gnoll had plates of metal held with leather straps over its chest and arms, and held a massive hammer that, if Michael had seen on it Earth, would easily weight fifty pounds.

Four pairs of eyes fixed on him and growls came from the Gnolls. Michael realized these were the guards to whoever led them, then he had no time to think as they attacked.

Michael dodged, parried, and attacked, doing all he could to force them to get in each other's way, but they didn't. They stepped nimbly out of their comrade's attack or blocked Micheal's even if he wasn't targeting them.

He tried to work out their strategy for attacking, they definitely had trained together and anytime a group trained they found a rhythm that worked for them, if he could work that out, he'd be able to figure out how to take advantage of it.

You have gained a level

Tactics	level 3
---------	---------

Too low a level then. He'd have to work on that after the fight was over. A sword got by his defenses and his armor, bringing his hit point bar down to three quarters.

If he survived the fight.

He was doing damage. The four of them were bleeding, but anytime he lined up a killing blow, another got in the way; either taking the hit which wasn't aimed properly to kill them, or deflecting it enough it didn't kill its intended target.

In a four against one battle of attrition, Michael wouldn't win, but he'd be damned if he was going to go down easy.

The hammer came down toward his head, and Michael raised his shield quickly throwing ten-point in his strength to increase his chances of taking the blow. The impact resounded through his entire body and he dropped to a knee as the red bar dropped below half, but the Gnoll's stomach was before him without anyone to intervene.

With a scream to drown his pain, Michael thrust his sword in and stood, raising his sword before pulling it out. The Gnoll staggered back before falling.

You are now level 28

In the seconds that followed he glanced at the flashing red icon next to his bleeding ones.

Numb	Debuff	Stackable
You have taken a blow in such a way that a limb is now numb and unresponsive. Duration 1 minute. Only one such debuff can be gained per limb, but subsequent hits will reset the timer.		

Micheal had no problem figuring out which limb was affected since he couldn't even feel the shield hanging on his arm. He looked at his stunned opponents, ignoring the sounds of the ongoing battle.

"I have no idea if you understand me, but surrender, and I will spare your lives." He put all the confidence he could muster in the words. It was still the three of them against one of him, and he had less than half his hit points left. If he couldn't intimidate them into giving up, he was going to die.

You have learned a skill	
Intimidation	level 1

The snarls told him his new skill hadn't been enough to scare them. A glance at the numb icon showed it still had forty-five seconds to go, then he was fighting again.

His hit points dropped steadily as he took hits after hits. It was close to the quarter mark when he killed the Gnoll with the stone sword. His shield arm had regained function halfway through that and saved his life.

Two against one. Below a hundred hit points, Michael guessed. He added ten to his endurance and hoped it would help. The bar showed no noticeable changes.

Oh well. He grinned at the remaining Gnolls and wondered how scary he looked to them, covered in their companion's blood. Not scary enough, he decided as the two charged him.

Michael blocked, parried, and dodged as he looked for an opening. He couldn't afford to take any hits since only a few of them would drop him to zero hit points, and Micheal suspected that was his death. A sword got through his defense and the red bar dropped below a fifth.

He was dead.

Michael accepted that. And with that out of the way, his goal became to remove one of the two Gnoll from the battle. Each would get through too many of the legionnaires. He had to make sure his allies could win this.

He threw himself at the closest Gnoll, blocking as best as he could, but not bothering avoiding the hits. His bar dropped to almost nothing as he planted his sword in the Gnoll's chest, watching the other come at him.

Michael closed his eyes and waited for death to claim him.

In the dark, he couldn't miss his hit point bar flash and begin to fill.

He opened his eyes in surprise as the sword pierced his side. The pain made him back away, pulling his sword out of the Gnoll and the one out of him. A new bleeding debuff appeared in the top right corner. The only one there. Where had the others...

Michael looked around and saw Astair, hands glowing, and a look of determination on his face. What was the cleric doing there? He'd given orders for him to stay in the woods.

His hit point bar flashed again and filled to the quarter mark.

A roar and motion made Michael move as the cleric dropped to a knee. The sword cut him instead of stabbing through. And Michael smiled at the Gnoll. Astair might have disobeyed orders, but he'd just given him the victory. One on one, the Gnoll was dead.

And then the Gnoll began glowing.

With a curse Michael rushed him, noting that the Gnoll's wounds were closing. The Gnoll batted Michael aside, and he went flying, managing to avoid landing on his shield but losing his sword.

Michael got to his feet. In the doorway of the large shelter stood a smaller, older, Gnoll wearing a loincloth made of furs, bones knotted in his short fur, some sort of white, glowing, collar, and holding a staff with the skull of some sort of rodent at the end, which was glowing.

Glowing and a healing Gnoll. That meant a cleric of some sort.

Michael got to his feet and looked for his sword. Not finding it, he settled for the stone one. A look to Astair, who was panting on a knee, told him he wasn't getting any more help. The Gnoll's armor mended itself. More than simple healing, then.

Michael ran for the Gnoll cleric. Disrupt the support system, best way to win a war. Unfortunately, the still glowing Gnoll didn't make it easy on him; intercepting Michael halfway there.

Michael blocked the sword, and the impact forced him back. The Gnoll was stronger than before. Definitely more than healing. He had to take out the cleric if he wanted any chance of winning this. A quarter of his hit points wasn't going to do him much good if the Gnoll kept healing the damage he received.

Michael tried to outmaneuver the Gnoll, but he wouldn't let him. He knew where his strength came from and wasn't going to let Michael get to the cleric. He blocked three more swings and Michael began to see light through his shield; it wasn't going to last long.

Throwing himself aside, Michael swung hard, cutting through the armor and the Gnoll's side. He deflected a blow with his shield as he got to his feet and swung again, the Gnoll stepping back in time to only lose a few fingers on his off-hand, then he was swinging at Michael.

He jumped back, letting go of the shield for more maneuverability. He couldn't afford even small cuts, those bleed debuffs would kill him in time. He saw a sword lying on the ground and grabbed it, barely turning in time to parry with it.

You have learned a skill	
Parry, Off-Hand, One-Handed Sword	level 1

The motions had come too easily to be just level one, but he didn't have the time to question it. He slashed with the stone sword, and that cut closed immediately.

He parried and slashed with the other sword, making a long cut on the Gnoll's chest.

You have learned a skill	
Slash, Off-Hand, One-Handed Sword	level 1

The message, as well as the Gnoll's free hand, distracted him. He barely moved in time for the Gnoll's sword to slice his side instead of running him through. The hit point bar was close to one fifth.

There was something odd with the Gnoll's hand, the fingers were of even length. As if they'd been sliced off.

They had. Michael had sliced the fingers off, and while they weren't bleeding, they hadn't regrown. If he could cut off the Gnoll's limbs, he wouldn't get it back.

Michael blocked the swing coming down at his head by crossing his swords and kicked the Gnoll back. When the Gnoll returned, Michael sidestepped him and swing at the wrist of his sword hand, but the Gnoll was too quick and he only sliced it half off. The Gnoll still lost his sword, but the injury was healing.

Michael pressed his advantage, slashing and thrusting quickly, forcing the Gnoll away from his weapon.

You have learned a skill	
Thrust, Off-Hand, One-Handed Sword	level 1

You have gained a level	
Thrust, Off-Hand, One-Handed Sword	level 2

You have gained a level	
Slash, Off-Hand, One-Handed Sword	level 2

Michael grinned at the Gnoll and jumped to the side, running at the cleric who was so focused on keeping the glow going he didn't notice him until Michael ran him through with his sword.

A scream sounded behind him and Michael turned as the no longer glowing Gnoll rushed him, claws and fangs bared. Michael waited, and sliced with both swords quickly, cutting the hands off, and then the Gnoll's head with a last swing.

You are now level 29

Michael dropped to a knee, using the stone sword to prop himself up. The sounds of battle weren't as loud as he expected, now that he could pay attention to them. Looking around, he could see mainly legionnaires, with a few Gnolls going down.

Coughing next to him made him look at the Gnoll cleric, he looked to have difficulty breathing, blood pouring from his mouth, but his eyes were fixed on Michael.

"This isn't over," a voice, with what Michael thought was a French accent, seeth from the unmoving mouth, "I will make you pay for breaking my things."

The Gnoll's eyes turned glassy as the white collar glowed brighter, then disappeared in a flash of light.

"Dhomis protect us," Astair said.

Quest	Protect Cosconius, 3	Type	Path, Continuation
You have defeated the intruding Gnolls, but they were acting under someone else's instructions, and that person is now aware of your intervention. It's now a question of if you can find and stop them before they find and stop you.			
This quest is automatically accepted as part of the path			

"How certain are you?" Michael asked Astair.

The emaciated cleric fixed his gaze on Michael. "The collar of Elmigal is not something one mistakes."

Michael, Astair, Joran, Pompeia, and Calvisia stood around the planning table. Astair had gone around healing the worst of the injuries until he was exhausted. They'd lost twelve legionnaires in the fight, which the outpost leader considered reasonable and Michael did his best to accept. War had casualties, even when it was on a small scale.

"What is he?" Michael asked, to keep his mind focused on the task, "or she? Or are gods an it?" Michael didn't bother hiding his ignorance. He'd found the legionnaires' easy acceptance that he was from a vague elsewhere comforting. Even Calvisia had done nothing more than shrug.

"Elmigal is a she," Astair answered. "Although gods will be however they wish to be, they tend to be depicted only in one form. She is a beautiful woman, usually in thin robes hinting of more beauty underneath, offering herself to you. Promising pleasure if only you will do as she asks. But if you look closely, you will see places where her disguise slips and reveal something far less pleasant. Spiked skin, black as night, ready to lash you to her, force you to do her bidding. She does not let those under her command disobey her without punishment."

Michael looked at Joran. "That sounds like she's one of those dark gods you

mentioned.”

“She is,” Astair answered in Joran’s stead. “She is one of the few without redeeming qualities.”

“So that Gnoll was one of her priests, one of her clerics,” Michael corrected himself.

“No,” Joran and Astair said together. The legionnaire nodded to the cleric.

“The collar is something she grants to her clerics to force obedience.” Astair looked grave. “And they only work within a dozen passus or so.” He looked at the others.

A dozen passus made that around a day’s march. “Didn’t you say there were signs a group had to be trailing this one?” Michael asked Calvisia.

“The scouts I sent to examine the route they took to arrive here indicated markers were left; which only matters if others will join you,” she answered.

“And you said the Gnoll told you they’d make you pay before dying,” Joran said.

“More who was controlling it.” Michael looked at the hand-drawn maps. Found one where the markers were indicated. This gave him an indication of where Elmigal’s cleric would come from. “Any idea how large a group will be with the cleric?” he asked Astair.

The man shook his head. “It depends on how many they have to control versus follow them willingly.”

Michael stared at the man. “You’re saying people would willingly submit to that kind of treatment?”

“Some will do anything to achieve power,” the cleric answered. “To gain her gift of the collar, the potential cleric must demonstrate a willingness to commit horrible acts in her name. To show their faith to her. Others will crave that power and flow to the cleric in hopes of gaining it.” Astair sighed. “And some will.”

“I doubt Gnolls follow this cleric willingly,” Lierin said, joining them. “Gnolls are proud and stubborn. They follow their clan leader or their shaman. The one you fought, Michael, was their shaman. It’s possible the clan leader is with the cleric, in which case they could control a large group through that one Gnoll.”

“All that reading is finally paying off,” Pompeia commented.

“It’s part of the world’s history,” Lierin replied with a smile. “The past shapes the future.”

“Those who ignore the past are condemned to repeat it,” Michael mused to himself, looking for a map with better details of the area with the markers. He looked up in the silence. “It’s a saying where I’m from. Usually said by historians pointing out were making the same mistakes our ancestors did in a similar situation, instead of having learned from it.”

The half-elf looked at Pompeia with a victorious grin. “An entire people study their past.”

“I wouldn’t say ‘an entire people,’” Michael chuckled. “And they are paid attention about as much as Pompeia listens to you, Lierin.”

“Anyone who thinks they are right,” the outpost leader said, “will not listen to those showing how they could be wrong.”

“And some,” Astair added, “will go to extremes to ensure their beliefs are the only ones left in the end.”

“Such as working for a dark god,” Michael concluded. “How many people can a cleric control with that collar?”

“As many as they want, if they collar the correct person,” Astair answered.

“Like the clan leader,” Lierin said.

“But how many people can they put that collar on?” Michael asked. “I figure there’s some kind of limit, right?”

Astair nodded. “It will depend on how powerful the cleric is, as well as how willful those they control are.”

“So it’s possible for someone to resist that control.” Michael didn’t recall a willpower stat to tell him just how stubborn he might be.

“Possible, but unlikely,” Astair said. “If this cleric controls this many Gnolls, even through the controlled of their shaman and leader, they are powerful.”

Michael didn’t know how stubborn he was. He liked to think he could be driven, but was that the same? He thought so, but that was back on Earth, here where everything seemed to be driven by stats and numbers he had to consider it might be different. It was too bad he had never looked at those manuals his Dungeon and Dragon playing buddies had. The answer might have been in there, somewhere.

“So, we are looking at a group of unknown size, led by a cleric of unknown power. What else can one of her clerics do? Stories where I’m from show any cleric can at least heal others, but from what I’ve seen here I get the sense that isn’t the case.”

“Any gifts she’ll bestow on her cleric will be toward establishing obedience,” Joran said.

“Enforcing it,” Astair corrected. “Elmigal has no interest in willing obedience to her priests. She’ll allow it, but her gifts are about enforcement. But the gods are stingy with their gifts. One must show more and more devotion to be granted more power.”

Michael studied Astair. “How more do you have to starve yourself to gain something else?”

Astair shrugged. “I’ll know once Dhomis grants it to me.”

That was a level of devotion Michael couldn’t imagine. “So this cleric might have something else, but it’s unlikely?”

“It’s unlikely they’ll have another gift from Elmigal, yes,” Astair said.

“But that doesn’t mean they won’t have learned other things,” Joran said. “They could know some magic, some fighting. Don’t make the mistake of thinking being a cleric is all they are. Not all gods require the kind of devotion Dhomis asks of Astair. And even under the weight of his god, Astair cooks.”

“You cook?” Michael asked, dismayed.

“Sacrifice is meaningless without temptation,” the cleric answered casually.

Michael looked for anything to say to that and decided he wasn’t someone who

could comment on Astair's faith, other than to be impressed by the devotion.

"Okay, so probably no god other given powers, but he might still be a threat." He looked to the outpost leader. "If we consider he's heading for us, for me. Do you think there's a chance we can send scouts to find out how many are in his group?"

"They'll be on alert for it, so it'll be risky," She answered. "It would also depend on how quickly they are moving. Knowing we are aware they are coming, they might push through the night. They won't make as good speed as in the day, but it will put them here sooner than we expect."

"But they'll be exhausted from the travel," Joran said.

"Would the cleric care?" She asked Astair.

The cleric looked at Michael. "How angry did they sound?"

Michael did his best to recall the words, the intonation. "Very angry."

"Then I'm not sure they'll care. Clerics of Elmigal are not known for their patience."

"Then we need to rest and be ready," Michael said. "Astair, do you think you can have everyone healed by morning?"

"Yes," the cleric answered without hesitation, then placed a hand on Michael's arm. Before he could protest, Michael's hit point bar refilled completely and Astair looked tired.

"You should have seen to the others first," Michael chastised him, and the cleric answered with a shrug before walking away. "That goes for you too," he told those around the table. "Go eat and then rest. I get the feeling tomorrow's going to be hard."

* * * * *

Michael looked up at the Arrow, visible through the light foliage of the tree he was seated against. According to the maps, the cleric's groups was north by northwest of where the Gnolls had made camp. While he didn't know what the markers looked like, he had an idea where they were, based on the map. Once he found a few of them, he'd be able to recognize the rest and follow them to—

Joran flopped on the ground next to him. "I will tell you this right now, I've instructed the watch not to let you sneak out in the night."

Michael narrowed his eyes at the man. "I thought mind magic was something Granius didn't allow someone like you to study." He didn't bother denying Joran's implication. The order had been given and the watch would ignore any words contradicting it.

"Knowing you doesn't require mind magic, just to have fought at your side. You see your strength as a burden and you feel the only way you can assuage it is by ensuring you keep all of us safe." The legionnaire didn't look at Michael while he spoke. "It isn't your duty to keep us safe, Michael. We are soldiers too."

"You have a family, Joran, so do they." Michael motioned to the legionnaires eating and talking. "They have friends, people who'll miss them. I..."

"You don't think I'll miss you? Galio, Octacilia? The others."

"It's not the same." Michael searched for a way to explain that he didn't deserve

any of it. That he needed to make up for how badly he'd screwed up his previous life, and the only way he could think of doing that was to ensure they were all safe. If not all the soldiers at least his friends.

But how insane would any of it sound to Joran?

Joran looked at him. "You don't need to be punished for what happened to you before you came here."

"I'm not—" he snapped and stopped. He sighed. "You should be a shrink."

"I have no idea what that is," Joran replied with a grin.

"That's for the best, the only thing I hate more than those are lawyers."

"Those I do know and I do not care for them myself." He patted Michael's leg before standing. "When we attack them tomorrow, do not make it your duty to die saving us. Not all of us will return, but no one should seek to die. It's not good for morale."

Michael watched his friend walk away and tried to decide how much he needed to hate him for pointing out the one thing that had Michael rethinking his strategy. He was right. As the man they looked to for leadership, Michael's behavior affected them. The fact Joran had to set the watch on him already lowered the mood. Would they think he was planning on abandoning them? Or that he lacked confidence in their ability to fight?

Either led to lower morale, so he wouldn't sneak away. Not that he could, Michael suspected, his sneak skill was abysmal.

Thief Skills	Category level 3
Stealth	13 (base 9, plus bonus)
Perception	6 (base 5, plus bonus)
Intimidation	2 (base 1, plus bonus)

Or maybe not abysmal, but still rather low. People put on watch had to have high perception skills.

Michael brought the skill list back up with a thought and focused on the category

Thief skills are the skills used in the act of committing crimes, or by those seeking to stop those crimes from being committed.

He'd done this before, focus on something that was part of his character sheet, and gained information. Not everything did. A description of what faith meant in this world still escaped him no matter how hard he focused on it.

Could he do it for something that wasn't marked on his sheet? He focused on willpower.

Willpower is what allows someone to continue despite everything that attempts to stop them. It can be through sheer determination, a use of their intellect to see a path through what stands before them, the wisdom to find a way around it, or in their faith that there is a way to proceed.

Intelligence, Wisdom, Faith.

His two lowest stats and the one that was so low it didn't even have a number. He couldn't risk falling victim to that collar, he wouldn't be able to resist it, and if the cleric turned him against his soldiers Michael would carve a swath through them.

Joran might slow him, Lierin would fill him with arrows before he got close to her. Galio and Caius wouldn't last long, Michael was sorry to admit. They were decent soldiers but not on his level, not after all the training with Granius. Same with Pompeia and Octacilia.

It was the one reason why he should do this alone if he didn't want to consider any others. He was a danger to his soldiers, possibly a bigger one than however many Gnolls the cleric had.

He had to believe he could avoid being collared, and that his soldiers would know what to do if he was. He chuckled, right, faith again. That thing he didn't believe he had.

He rubbed his face and decided he was done thinking about that. He piled branches and leaves before him and focused on them. He slowed his breathing and extended a hand to it, imagining heat coming off them until he felt his hand warm. He snapped his fingers and glared at the flame at the end of his thumb. He extinguished it by shaking his hand and tried again.

After the fourth time, he was mentally exhausted and hadn't succeeded at causing the flame to appear among the branches. He lied down, looked at the stars in the sky, made out the Archer, behind the arrow. Joran's son had pointed it out to Michael, that one time he'd accepted to spend an evening with them. Unlike on Earth, it took little imagination to see the figure with the bow. There had to be close to thirty stars that formed him, or her, their bow. The angle was wrong for the Arrow to come from them, but there was no doubting they were an archer.

He saw other clusters of stars forming other shapes, but Micheal's eyes closed before he could recall or make up names for them, and the dreamless night embraced him.

* * * * *

Michael and Calvisia had decided to let the cleric and their group of Gnolls reach the clearing. They'd need the room to fight, and while the cleric knew Michael and others had won this fight, there was a chance the others would still be shocked.

So they were positioned around the clearing again, much like they had been the previous day, except Michael was only fifty paces from the path the cleric's group was on. They'd agreed his job was to take out the cleric as quickly as possible while the others engaged the Gnolls.

An hour after they took position, the sounds reached them. People walking, branches slapping against people, annoyed grunts, and words Michael didn't understand.

Not long after that, the first of the Gnoll reached the clearing and as expected they stopped at the sight of the dead. They grunted, yelped, and made sounds Michael had no descriptions for to the people behind them, and the reply was clear in its tone. Move

forward.

They did and sideways to form a rough perimeter to protect whoever else was coming. Michael cursed, he'd hoped for a clear line of attack. This meant he'd have to go through some of the Gnolls to reach the cleric.

The last entered the clearing and Micheal had no doubt who his target was. The woman was the only human and wore a white robe, still immaculate despite the traveling she'd done, as was her ebony hair, flowing down to her shoulders. There was contempt in her hazel eyes when she looked over the dead. They'd failed her, and it was the only thing she cared about. Michael had the sense if she'd been able to bring them back to life, she'd do so just to be able to show her displeasure.

Next to her, the Gnoll in leathers and skins and with the collar around his neck looked appalled. He cared about the dead, was devastated, but didn't show the rage he had to feel. Unable due to the collar? Or did he simply know she'd be unhappy about the display?

"Well, this is a disappointment," she said, her French accent thick. "You'd told me your dogs were fierce." She fixed her gaze on the Gnoll leader and he dropped to his knees with a yowl of pain, which intensified as he reached for the collar. "Now, now, what have I told you about trying to get out of your deserved punishment? Are you a dog or a man?"

Michael slip his shield over his arm and took his sword out of its sheath, using the scream to cover any sound the movements might cause. He pushed his anger down as he decided to end this as quickly as possible. He'd considered letting her surrender, when she was some abstract enemy, giving her a chance to face judgment for attacking Cosconius. Michael had passed judgment on her based on the way she treated the Gnoll leader, and now he was going to execute her.

He ran at the Gnolls, distracted watching their leader being tortured. An order came from the trees accompanied by what Michael thought was Joran cursing him. Taking a chance, Michael jumped over the Gnolls and easily cleared them, landing next to the Gnoll leader and slamming his shield on his head.

Michael swung his sword at her, but the worlds spun at a gesture from her hand and he staggered, fighting to keep his breakfast from coming back up. He forced a foot down toward her, except she now stood to his left and was several steps further away. She gestured again and his vision blurred, motion lines as everything spun around him.

He closed his eyes and set another foot down in the direction he thought she was. He dropped to a knee as his sense of up and down flipped. She could affect more than his vision, but he wasn't letting her get away with this. He forced himself to his feet, even if his body believed it was upside down.

"Let them go," he ordered through gritted teeth.

"Oh my, you are strong." She sounded amused, and now to his right.

"Lady, you have no idea." He almost tripped as he turned toward her voice.

"What you're doing is wrong."

"No, what I do is right." Her amusement was gone. "Because I say it is. Because

my goddess says it is. And now, because you say it is.”

Pain brought him to his knees as an icon appeared where his debuff showed up. A collar of spikes.

Collar of Elmigal

Debuff

The Collar of Elmigal is given to her cleric for them to enforce obedience. The recipient must obey or suffer the punishment

Michael’s stamina bar dropped as he grabbed the collar and tried to pull it off. How could he have been this stupid, this was exactly what he was supposed to avoid. Now she controlled him. She would turn him against his soldiers.

“Stop that,” she ordered and Michael’s hand dropped to his side as the pain faded. He panted, glaring at her. “See how this works? You do what I tell you, the pain goes away, it is that simple. Now take up your sword.”

Michael fought the compulsion to reach for the sword he’d dropped trying to remove the collar, and ground his teeth together to avoid voicing the pain. His stamina dropped below half.

“No,” he growled out.

“I said, pick up your sword!”

The pain spiked as his stamina kept dropping. He fought the pain as best he could, tried to come up with something he could do, anything, but he couldn’t even move the way he wanted. He definitely couldn’t pick up the sword, as badly as he wanted to ram it into her; because once he had it in hand, once he felt relief from the pain, he wasn’t sure he could get himself to disobey her and feel this again.

His stamina bar hit bottom and his hit point bar appeared, dropping, if not as fast. He was unable to keep from screaming. Through it, he glared at her, hated her. If there had ever been something like a witch back on Earth, she was it. And he wanted her to burn like them.

He wished he’d practiced his fire magic. If he’d been able to, he would throw a giant fireball at her, but all he could do was a small flame, and not even at what he wanted.

He glared at her, looked for anything he thought might burn easily. Poured his anger into it. Her hair, he decided. Poured his hate into one spot over her ear, imagined the glowing red heat coming from it. She smiled as he raised his hand up, an eyebrow going up in haughty amusement.

He brought his thumb and middle finger together and snapped.

She smiled, and Michael almost lost focus as the flame appeared in her hair and faltered.

His hit points had dropped by a quarter, but he didn’t care. He snapped his fingers again and a second flame appeared in her hair as the first one extinguished itself, leaving charred strands. Another snap another flame, again as the one extinguished itself.

“You are wasting your time, my goddess protects—” she sniffed the air as he kept

snapping his fingers adding more flames to her hair. He was now able to keep three active.

She looked around as a flame caught in her moving hair and with a shriek she batted at it.

Michael fell forward as the pain vanished. He could barely move, but he closed his hands around the hilt of the sword. He wouldn't have long. He forced himself to his feet using the sword to carry his weight.

You have learned a skill

Endurance

level 1

He ignored the message and pushed a shaking leg forward. She had the flames out, but didn't seem to realize it. Another foot forward, and another. She was done batting at her hair. She looked at her damaged hair; dismay giving way to anger.

As she turned to look at Michael, he took the last step, putting his hand on her shoulder for support and planting his sword in her chest as the debuff reappeared and the pain spiked. Then the two vanished and he could breathe. He'd lost a few hit points but still had plenty.

She looked surprised as blood bubbled from her mouth, disbelieving. She mouthed something like 'not again' and staggered back from him. Michael twisted his sword as it pulled out to ensure more damage. She put a hand to her chest and blood flowed over it.

"This isn't over," she snarled. "I know where this place is, and I'm going to come back and make you pay." She let out a curse as her eyes went lifeless and she fell sideways. As she fell, she turned into motes of light so that nothing was left by the time she should have hit the ground.

Michael staggered back and fell as knowledge hit him hard.

You have learned a Spell

Dull, Vision

level 1

You have learned a Spell

Dull, Hearing

level 1

You have learned a Spell

Dull, Smell

level 1

You have learned a Spell

Keen, Taste

level 1

You have learned a Spell

Keen, Touch

level 1

You have learned a Spell Dullness	level 1
You have learned a Spell Fear	level 1
You have learned a Spell Forgetfulness	level 1
You have learned a Spell Disorient	level 1
You have learned a Spell Daze	level 1
You have learned a Spell Panic	level 1
You have learned a Spell Mindlessness	level 1
You have learned a Spell Command	level 1
You have learned a Spell Sleep	level 1
You have learned a Spell Avoid	level 1
You are currently level 1 in the Mind Control spell category	
You are now level 37	

Michael was on his back, trying to make sense of the information in his head. Mind Control? Mind magic? Where had that come from? He didn't want to do that. It wasn't even allowed for someone like him to know it, right? Only the most powerful mages could study mind magic and he'd just managed to get his flame to appear somewhere other than his thumb. There was no way he was going to be allowed to do this.

The panic icon faded into being, but Michael couldn't do anything about it.

What would Granius do when he found out? He was going to kick him out. Michael was going to be thrown out of the army again. He was going to be alone, his life was going to crumble again. He—

“Michael!” Joran shook him. “Michael, look at me.”

He forced his focus on the words, on Joran’s face.

“Come on, Michael, I know killing an Outlander is unnerving, but this isn’t over yet.”

“That was...” Michael couldn’t form the words. He focused on remaining standing with Joran’s help.

“That was one of the monsters we told you about.”

Michael realized someone was barking, and there was growling in return. “Did we win?”

“That’s still undecided.” Joran turned Michael so he could see the Gnoll leader being held up as he was. “Her death and subsequent dispersement stopped the fighting, but that doesn’t mean it’s over. They didn’t know what she was, I don’t think, but there’s no telling what they’ll do once he gets over the surprise.” He indicated the leader.

Michael tried to take a step in his direction and almost fell out of Joran’s grasp. He needed to catch his breath and let his stamina refill. But he needed to make sure the fighting was over first. He tried again, and this time Joran moved with him.

“What are you doing?” Joran whispered.

“Hopefully, making sure the fighting doesn’t restart.”

“Michael, they are nothing more than beasts, you can’t reason with them.”

Michael hesitated, Joran knew what Gnolls were better than he did, and maybe she’d spoken to the Gnoll just to hear herself talk and not because he understood her. Maybe what he needed to do was rest and prepare himself to fight. Michael looked over his shoulder at the too few numbers standing.

“You kill it.” The voice was deep, growly, halting, but Michael understood the words. By the surprise on Joran’s face, he did too. That was good.

The Gnoll leader shook the one holding him off and walked toward him and Joran. Michael wanted to take a step forward, give a show of strength. But unlike the Gnoll, without Joran, he was falling on his face. The Gnoll rubbed his head.

“Hit me.”

Michael couldn’t make sense of the tone, and even with the gesture, it took him a few seconds to work it out. “Yeah, sorry about that. I didn’t think I could take you in a fair fight.”

The Gnoll’s face was unreadable. Was he trying to work out what Michael had said? Was he planning the attack? Maybe he was considering if a jig was a proper response to being saved? Michael kept from chuckling through willpower alone.

Maybe he had some of that after all.

“You kill lots,” the Gnoll said, motioning to the dead around them.

Michael looked, giving himself time to figure out what to say. “Do you know the word territory?” he asked.

After a second the Gnoll nodded.

“This is our territory,” Michael said. “You were invading it. Intruding,” he tried at the confusion on the Gnoll’s face. It didn’t go away.

“Taking over,” Joran said, his expression adding he couldn’t believe he was trying to communicate with the being before them.

“Take over.” The Gnoll nodded. “Not want to. Happy.” He indicated where they had come from, then the spot where the cleric’s body should be. “It.” He touched his neck. “Wrapped and tell me to send family here. Pain when I tell no.”

Michael hoped family didn’t mean to the Gnoll what it meant to him. If Micheal had taken part in killing someone’s—

“Micheal, focus.” Joran’s tone was sharp. The Gnoll watched him.

Anytime he’d killed, Michael had killed someone’s family, he reminded himself. This was just the first time one of the relatives told him about it.

Michael swallowed. “We didn’t know. They came. They took over. We had to protect our territory.”

The Gnoll looked around. “Lots dead.”

“We didn’t want to,” Michael said.

“It made dead,” the Gnoll said.

Michael looked at where the body should be. His stomach turned at what Outlanders could do. He touched his neck, shuddering at the memory.

“You say no,” the Gnoll said, watching him. Micheal nodded. “The pain?”

He forced a smile. “Big.” Bigger than anything he’d experienced before.

“You say no.” The tone sounded ashamed. “You strong.”

“No. It’s not strength.” But he couldn’t explain what having nothing to lose was to the Gnoll. What desperation was.

“You strong,” the Gnoll repeated. “We go. Not take over.” He barked something, the responses were angry, and he barked louder. He’d made his decision, and it was all that mattered.

Michael remained where he was until they were all gone. As he watched them, his stamina slowly refilled and reached the halfway point by the time no living Gnolls were left in the clearing.

He turned. “Leave one Contuberium here to make sure they don’t change their mind, we—” he stopped, finally taking in the state of the soldiers. “Forget that. We’re going back to camp. Take as many of our dead as you can, we’ll come back for the others if needed.”

They were able to bring all the bodies back. Micheal carried Galio’s body. Joran’s Octacilia’s.

* * * * *

“I don’t really know how to do this,” Michael said, cup of wine in his hand, Joran on one side, Pompeia on the other. On the other side of the biers, Lierin and Caius stood. “I didn’t really know either of them.”

“Speak to what about them will stay with you,” Joran said. “Tell us how they will

remain in the world through you.”

“Map drawing,” Michael said. “Octacilia was always drawing her maps. She has the city down to the smallest alley. You guys saw her draw on the way here? You noticed her smirk at the maps we had to work with?”

Joran chuckled.

“I don’t know if I can draw worth shit, but that’s what I’m going to take with me from her.” Michael looked at the other body, and thought for a second. “From Galio it’s sewing. I don’t care if back home I’d be laughed at for doing it, in this place I’m amazed your guys don’t all know how. Why did we all depend on him to fix any tear in our uniforms?” Michael looked around accusingly.

Pompeia shrugged. “He was the best.”

“He was,” Caius agreed. “I’m going to apply myself to my swordplay. That’s what I will take of him. When we joined, I could beat him anytime we trained together, but within a year, he surpassed me. I just couldn’t get myself to care enough. Magic is what I want.” He paused. “I’m the one who should have died, not him.”

Michael opened his mouth to protest, but Joran stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“So I’m going to keep Galio with me by making sure that my sword will never again be my weakness, magic or not.”

They went around, each speaking to what they would keep of their dead friend. Once they were done, they drank their cup. The wine was watered down due to there being so many dead to be spoken about. Then they stepped back.

“You didn’t get to see me join the college,” Caius said, “but you get to see me do magic one last time. Safe travel and may the gods welcome you.” With a flourish of the hand, both biers were engulfed in flames. Caius raised his cup again and drained it. The others joined him and then they stood in silence.