

As he walked, the path went from trampled grass to packed dirt as the forest lightened and disappeared. When it merged with a stone road the hills were covered with growing wheat with the occasional farmhouse visible.

He could just make out a palisade in the distance when a group of people became visible, running in his direction. Michael walked faster, returning their waving. 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 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 other will all die.”

Others? Die?

“You left people behind?” Michael asked.

“I told them to run! But the fools are waiting for the city’s militia.”

Quest: Windfall is under attack

Type: Situational

The village of Windfall is under attack by a horde of monster and the city militia is nowhere in sight. Not everyone can be saved, but any help will help

Will you help the village of Windfall?

Of course, Michael thought, as he picked up speed. The city had to be Novus Roma, which Gilda said was two scores of days, forty days, 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 from 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* he'd never used before.

He ran through the open section of the palisade and wooden houses were on the other side, spread apart. They were mainly once story hovels, with a handful of 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. The 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, Sword: One-handed, 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 the 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, Praetore 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 creature from breaking through. Michael hadn't known what to think when the man had said a horde, but through the opening, but the creatures were massed further than he could see.

He ran by bodies, dead men and creatures, and jumped in place of a man as he

fell.

You have learned a skill  
Jumping, level 1

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

You have gained a level  
Slashing, Sword: One-handed, 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.

You have gained a level  
Shield, bashing, level 2

The man on his left and right were fighting with clubs that might have been farm implement 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 it felt. It faded away if he could avoid getting hurt for a few seconds, but it didn't replenish. In the upper right of an icon appeared, a blood drop, more piling on each time he felt claws.

The man on his right fell under half a dozen creature, his pained screams ending when one bite 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 creature 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 was still going down even if he did manage to keep them from hurting him, or at least he through he was. He wasn't sure he could feel anything as tired as he was.

A gloved hand grabbed a creature off Michael and threw it away. A sword stabbed through another. Hands pulled Michael back and then were dragging him as 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," a 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. (stackable)

You've received a cutting injury and will lose 1 hit point per second until you heal 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 points.

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 up 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 Complete: Windfall is under attack

With your help, the horde was held back until the city Militia arrived.

Congratulation.

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

Statistics

Strength: 14

Agility 12

Intelligence 11

Endurance 15

Wisdom 8

Restart

Statistic Points to distribute: 15

Trait points to distribute: 4

Hit Points: 44 out of 150

Stamina points: 164 out of 164

Mana points: 91 out of 91

### Skills

Marshal: Level 1

Thrust, Sword: One-handed, level 1

Slashing, Sword: One-handed, level 6

Parry, Sword: One-handed, level 1

Thrust, Knife, level 1

Slashing, Knife, level 1

Parry, knife, level 1

Shield, blocking, level 1

Shield, bashing, level 2

Brawling, level 2

Dodge, level 1

Kicking, level 1

Dodge, level 1

Leadership, level 1

Athletic: Level 1

Running, level 1

Jumping, level 1

Looking at it, he realized this reminded him of the Dungeons and Dragons games some of the soldiers would play between deployments. Fantasy worlds with character sheets 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.

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 bonuses to your spells.

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

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.

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 young face and green eyes, now sweaty. 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 Centurion 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 centurion 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 centurion. 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. It’s the gods’ work that the dead number under a hundred.”

“A hundred dead?” Michael asked, his hands starting to shake. He closed them into fists and looked around, not hearing Joran’s answer. He spotted an open doorway and what looked like an empty room beyond it. “Excuse me.” He hurried inside and closed the door.

No, no, no. He was supposed to save them. 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 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 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, so if you're coming with us, you 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.

"Good. Lucius, you and your men are staying here to make sure those goblins are burned. Then your 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 Prefect 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?"

Restart

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