

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? As the soldiers and villagers made 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? If he can heal people, can't he heal himself?"

"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, 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 expected 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 centurion 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.”

“I can keep watch, help out where you need me.”

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

“One he 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 he ran away or hid. The brave one had all died.

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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 his wooden shield. He tried using the large ones the centurions used to form walls, but they were too unwieldy for him. He also went up a level and gained five more points he still didn’t know to distribute them.

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 centurions 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. Her lips moved, then she lifted her hands, and a flame jumped from the center of the pyramid of branches, 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 centurion 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 centurion. I’d have to give that up to learn anything beyond this and extinguishing fires in magic.”

Michael nodded and ate a few spoonfuls before indicating the fire. “The centurion 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 through 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 that way. The most 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 and 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 when 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
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Fire Spells is now level 1
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With a curse, Michael shook his hand, and the flame disappeared.

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 against, 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 finger, and the flame was there. The heat that of actual fire and he shook his hand, cursing afterward.

You have gained a level Flame	level 2
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“Thank a lot,” he told the message, 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 centurions, broad shoulder 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.”

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 hand before Michael and after a few seconds water because 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

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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, I’m just a soldier.”

“That may be,” Joran said, “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.”