

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 has 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 squares 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 formed 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, so 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 centurion, 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 centurion had found Michael a larger shield than the wooden one which had been destroyed and made of metal. This one could take hits and last.

Michael had known he'd 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 and had then accompanied them as prisoners. Michael had taken part, but other than gaining a level in his sword parrying skill, there had been no 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

He couldn't seem to separate those two.

The main thing that had jumped out at him was the bonuses. Like his skill some stats had bonuses, some didn't, and he couldn't figure out where they came from. And why he hadn't received a notification about it, 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, but not as much as he'd wanted. Walking while being attentive to potential threats did not lead to focusing on casting magic.

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"Done admiring the city?" Joran asked.

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

Joran laughed. "And keep you from taking it all in?" He easily caught up.

"I was lost in my head."

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

Michael stopped and spun to start at the centurion.

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 the 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.”

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, watching a muscular man covered with black fur pull 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 wanted to go to his help but looked to Joran.

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

“That’s a man.”

“It’s an animal, or as close to one as it gets,” Joran said, “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 them. Don’t worry, you won’t see many of them.” The centurion 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 things while living here.

The center of the avenue had trees with benches in the shade the occasional long 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 a street occasionally replacing the alley. 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 until the last block road, which Joran took 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 centurions 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 forming the wall and not breaking it as they turned, stopped, then exploding apart as swordsmen burst out to slash and thrust then returned in 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 managing 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. The man 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-six 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 from 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 centurions 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 wouldn’t have done any good.”

“A man who recognized 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. “The 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’s didn’t know who 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 to 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, centurion. 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 a fight’s 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, looked 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 head for now. Let me welcome you to the Cosconius army, Michael Vladmyr Rostov. I believe you will be able to accomplish great things with us. Centurion, see to it Michael is settled in one of the barracks. Michael, I'll see you here at the second hour after sunrise."

"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. Centurion, 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 other will be honored to have Michael in our unit."

"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."

"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)
Kata (one-handed sword, parry-thrust)	3 (base 1, 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)

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 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 extra skill added after the first two impart a ten-level penalty on all skills included. Adding skill from a different weapon imparts an additional ten-level penalty on all involved skills.

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.