

A Soldier's Life

- Chapter 1: Wrong Place, Wrong Time |

Chapter 1: Wrong Place, Wrong Time

I sat in the cold stone prison cell. The walls were worn, and the door was aged wood with heavy iron bands. I was literally wearing a potato sack. A dark wooden bowl of potato soup had steam rising from it near a stone slab that was my bed. I was not hungry, though. It was my second day of residence. How did I get here?

My nephew decided to have a shotgun wedding in South Dakota...in January. His high school girlfriend was pregnant, and her father was insisting on it. I decided to drive out from North Carolina for the wedding. While I was driving across the state of South Dakota, it started snowing...white-out conditions snowing...my phone was not getting any signal, so my GPS was not working. It had gotten so bad that visibility was nil, and the snow was accumulating fast on the highway with no plows in sight. I decided I had to get off the road.

If you have ever driven through South Dakota, you know there is nothing in South Dakota. I took what I thought was an exit off the highway and drove down a road looking for a hotel, restaurant, or at least a gas station to wait out the storm. Well, there were none of these things as I drove a short way down the narrow road off the highway. I tried to turn around but, of course, got my little Toyota RAV4 stuck. I sat in the car for about an hour, watching my gas gauge go down. I started turning the car on and off, heating the car when it got too cold. I got out every time I restarted the car to ensure the exhaust was clear and then eagerly warmed my cold body and hands for a few minutes.

Soon, it was sunset, and my gas was getting close to empty. It was around 1:00 a.m. when I finally ran out of gas. Fortunately, it was barely snowing now. I noticed a light in the distance. I was fairly certain it was not a street lamp, so I bundled up and approached it. I had to break through the 3-foot-deep snow to reach the light. It was tough, but when I finally arrived, I found it was a large barn. I walked around the building looking for the associated farmhouse but didn't see anything in the minimal light. I then decided to break into the barn, and I was able to pry the old door open just enough to squeeze in.

I used the light on my phone to examine the interior. Eventually, I found what appeared to be some old horse blankets. At least they smelled like horses. Being cold and exhausted, I bundled the horse blankets into a makeshift nest and curled up to get some sleep. I could see my breath, and my fingers and toes were numb from the cold.

I woke up to some light bleeding through the barn door. I looked for my phone and couldn't find it, and to my shock, I was also naked. I didn't remember stripping, but I had been cold, exhausted, and disoriented. I began crawling on the floor, looking for my clothes. I noticed it wasn't that cold. The barn door swung open as I was searching on my hands and knees. A middle-aged woman stood there, and we stared momentarily at each other.

Weirdly, the first thing I noticed after the woman was that there was no snow outside. Had I just pulled a Rip Van Winkle?

Well, she screamed and ran to the right. I tried to get her to calm down, running after her and yelling that I was not going to hurt her, but I forgot I was naked. I ran out of the barn to find myself standing butt-naked in the middle of a farm. There was an open stable to the left with some horses, a handful of chickens running around, and a large central farmhouse that had three young men running from it. I tried to talk to the angry boys, but they didn't seem to speak English and were yelling at me. Eventually, an older man came out with a small ancient crossbow. I knelt and immediately put my hands behind my head to appear as non-threatening as possible. It worked as I wasn't shot, and eventually, the younger boys tied me up, talking rapidly with their parents.

After talking amongst themselves, they seemed to decide I needed to be brought to the police. They put me in a wooden wagon, still naked, and hooked up some horses. I then spent the next six hours bouncing around, watching fields of wheat and rye pass by. My captors didn't respond to any of my efforts to communicate. Eventually, we entered a walled city that would fit any medieval setting. I was quickly escorted into a stone building and into my current cell. I was given a large, coarse burlap sack with holes for my head and arms.

No one could communicate with me. But after two days, finally, a man entered my cell. He wore rich yellow robes with a pristine white shirt and black pants. He had an impassive face as he stood over me and looked at the half-eaten bowl of potato soup.

The Magistrate introduced himself by activating a medallion that translated for us. “This device will allow us to talk openly with each other foreigner.” I processed that. So, this world had some type of technology—or magic? “I am Magistrate Advocate Persius. Your crimes have been logged. Do you wish your name to be associated with the writ, or should we leave it blank?”

“Crimes?” I questioned, standing. He stepped back but did not seem afraid of me. I did not look all that threatening in a sack.

He straightened himself, “You have been convicted of four separate charges. Trespassing, assault, attempted rape, and theft,” he said, reading from the parchment. “Each crime has a penalty of ten silver.”

My mouth hung, unable to work. I stuttered, “What? I had no trial.”

The Magistrate sighed, “The truthseeker already confirmed the crimes by questioning Hydran and his family. The verdict has been stamped and logged, and the court has paid the fines to him. You must now return the funds to the court.”

“Can I talk to the truthseeker to clear my crimes?” I asked hopefully.

“No, he has already returned to the city. We only received this translation amulet on loan to explain things to you since you seem to be a foreigner in the Empire,” he said with almost pity in his voice.

Besides trespassing, everything seemed to be concocted by the farmers for as much wealth as possible. I wanted to be angry but didn’t think that would benefit me at the moment. The Magistrate sighed at my silence, “If you can not pay, you can be ‘labored out’ by the court. It should take two years to pay the funds back to the court.” My disbelief was evident, and I think he smirked, “Or you can join the standing army. Foreigners are welcome, and you will pick up our tongue quickly. You will be trained, fed, and sheltered. The pay for a soldier is one silver and eight copper per week after you finish the seven-week training—three times the remuneration of a laborer.”

He expounded on the army, “You look a little flabby but have excellent size. Whatever your profession prior to your crimes,” he scrutinized my tall, overweight frame, “the army will teach you discipline and help you acclimate to the Empire. After your debt is paid, you will draw a bi-monthly wage. Enough to return to your homeland,” he smiled reassuringly.

I hesitated as it seemed he was more a recruitment director than a magistrate, and I could guess why my trial had not included my presence. I was assuming I was not on Earth or Earth's past or future. My anxiety was holding silence as my mind raced. I was alone and uncertain how they would treat someone from another world.

"I will join the army," I said hesitantly. My decision was for a few reasons—first, the protection of being in an organization. Second, I had nothing, so being fed and clothed was an incentive. The third reason was that I had no idea how to defend myself in this new world, and I felt my best chance of living was learning how to fight.

The Magistrate smiled like it had been a foregone conclusion. He was nice enough to answer my questions patiently, as he thought I was from a distant kingdom. I was interested in the currency system to find out how in debt I actually was. The monetary system followed: one hundred copper coins equal one silver coin. One hundred silver coins equal one gold coin. He showed me a silver coin, and it was about the size of a nickel. A large coin was the size of a half dollar and was worth ten coins.

The Magistrate produced a large stone tablet with silvery writing on it, "You are fortunate that I was here testing some youth. This is an assessment tablet. Do you have them where you come from?"

"No. What does it do?" I asked, looking at the well-worn stone.

He smiled tightly, "It will check your potential and ability. The army has minimum standards, but with your size, I think this is a formality." I was just shy of 6'1" and somewhere between 210 and 220 pounds. He instructed me to hold the tablet. I held the tablet for a moment, and the Magistrate activated it with his magic—definitely magic and not technology. It glowed, and the silvery script appeared. The letters looked vaguely familiar, but I could not read the words. The Magistrate told me what each line revealed, knowing that I could not read it if I did not speak the language.

The Magistrate pointed to each line and read it to me, explaining each as he read it.

Physical	Mental	Magical
Strength	21/79	Intellect 25/54 Aether Pool 7/21
Power	22/82	Reasoning 33/59 Channeling 2/55
Quickness	16/49	Perception 44/60 Aether Shaping 0/8

Dexterity	14/55	Insight	18/48	Aether Tolerance	19/50
Endurance	30/87	Resilience	40/71	Aether Resistance	3/19
Constitution	19/65	Empathy	9/21	Prime Aether Affinity	Space
Coordination	10/60	Fortitude	24/87	Minor Aether Affinity	Time

His voice sounded scholarly as he spoke, "This is a very old tablet and may not be precisely calibrated, but it should be close. The first number is your current score, and the second is your human potential. Now, a normal person typically has a current score between 10 and 25 with a potential between 30 and 60. The upper limit for a human is 100. The seven physical stats are very important for your new career as a soldier. Strength basically details how much weight you can move with your muscles." He looked at me dubiously. Not that the Magistrate looked fit himself.

"Your power is how fast you can move the weight. Quickness is how fast you can move and react. Dexterity reflects the manual control of your hands. Endurance reflects how long you can perform physical-related tasks. Constitution is your ability to ignore the pain and recover from injury. Coordination is your control over your entire body."

He shifted in his stance and continued, "Now, the requirements to join the general army are to have a potential of at least 40 in strength and endurance. So you qualify, congratulations." He sounded slightly mocking. "There is also a more advanced unit, the Legion of the Lion, you have probably heard of our famed legionnaires. They require you to have a minimum potential of 40 in all physical attributes and also 60 potential in Strength and Power. I will tell you only about one out of every three complete the training, which is quite rigorous."

"What does the rest of the tablet say?" I asked.

He looked down at it, "Not important for your new career, but I will explain. The next column is your mental traits. Your intellect shows your intelligence, how well you can recall knowledge. Your reasoning is your ability to understand..." he stopped before translating the numbers further. Running his finger down the second and then the third column. "Ah, you have excellent mental attributes and potential. Unfortunately, your magic traits are weak; otherwise, you might have been able to enroll in one of the magical colleges with a sponsor. Your affinities are both extremely rare as well."

He thought to himself for a long moment, "Ah well, sorry to get sidetracked. Let's see...your reasoning is your ability to utilize information. Your perception

is your awareness of the physical world. Your insight is your ability to decipher knowledge and make leaps of understanding. Resilience is your ability to resist mental attacks. Empathy is your ability to interpret other people's disposition. Finally, fortitude is your ability to function under mental fatigue and duress."

He paused to stretch his back from holding the stone, "Now the final column just represents your magic ability. Your Aether Pool reflects how much magic aether your body can hold. Channeling reflects how fast you can use aether and replenish aether. Shaping is the ability to mold aether into a usable construct or spell form. Your Aether Tolerance is how much aether you can channel before sustaining damage to your body over the course of a day. Your aether resistance is your ability to resist magic and aether backlash. All things you do not need to worry about as you will never be a mage."

He smiled congenially, "Now, the final two lines are your affinities. There are 21 affinities in magic. Seven common, seven uncommon, and seven rare. Your two affinities are rare, but the rest of your magical stats are not impressive. If you were to attend a magic college, you would be evaluated for all 21 magic affinities as each ranks between 0 and 100 as well. This simple old tablet I have lists only your two highest affinities."

He paused and let me ask questions, "What would be my term of service in the army and Legion of Lion?"

He couldn't hide his grin like he had hooked a fish, "Just five years. All your expenses will be paid by the Empire. The Lion is an elite unit and will also take outlanders. But do not get your hopes up; even though your stats qualify you based on your potential, only one in three finish the training. If you fail, though, the only punishment is to be relegated to the regular army." He added, "The Legion are the elites. They get higher pay, better food, and are trained more thoroughly. As a legionnaire, your pay is five silver and forty copper per week. Five times a soldier."

"What does the legion do that is different from the army?" I questioned.

"They serve as the elite troops of the kingdom, guarding mages, serving as royal guards, and elite troops in battle. The training is seven months, much longer than the seven weeks for a soldier," he elaborated.

I considered it and decided to apply to the Legion of the Lion. I thought seven months of training would be much better for my survivability than the seven

weeks I would get as a soldier. I said, somewhat confidently, “The Legion of the Lion.”

The Magistrate smiled and said, “Great! I will take care of the paperwork.” I later found out the Magistrate got bonuses of 1 silver for each soldier he recruited and a quarter gold for each legionnaire he recruited. Maybe the crafty Magistrate had led me to make my decision for me.

For the next meal, my potato soup had meat added to it and a half loaf of buttered bread. I felt like I was a pig being fattened for slaughter now that I knew my fate. After two days, I was off in a wagon. I had a sealed letter that had a copy of my statistics. Some city soldiers escorted me as they brought me to the training camp.

It was a six-day trip, and the caravan stopped in small towns every night, adding more potential soldiers each time. I couldn’t communicate, so I just observed and listened. Some words sounded familiar if I slowed down the speech and filtered the accent. I needed to learn the language as quickly as possible.

We had seven guards and four open wagons. My guards and fellow recruits did not want to take the time to help me with my language barrier. So, I did my best to pick up words. When I learned water was called aqua I realized the language was based on Latin, or maybe it was Latin. I only took three years of Spanish in high school and only remembered how to say was ‘my name is Eryk.’

By the time we arrived at the camp, there were 24 recruits, including me. The main camp was for training soldiers. It looked like there were roughly 1000 soldiers in training here in groups of 25 as they marched in five-by-five blocks. I didn’t have much time to watch as 21 recruits from my caravan got out here. Two other larger recruits and myself were brought to a smaller camp, the training camp for the Legion of the Lion, which had a large manor nearby.

My two companions from the trip and I were brought inside a wooden barracks. About three-fourths of beds were occupied. We took three of the open bunks. I immediately went to sleep, mentally and physically exhausted from my ordeal so far.

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Chapter 2: Training

At breakfast, the food they fed us was copious but bland. I had trouble eating as my new reality was sinking in. I listened intently to others speaking and heard familiarity in their speech but did not place it. Some words almost made sense, but the heavy accent and rapid speech made it difficult. We had no guards when I walked around the buildings. That surprised me, but I remained close to my assigned building and watched the older classes training. They worked on conditioning, fighting with various weapons, and coordinated marches and small formations of sixteen to twenty men. My stomach roiled as the muscular and fit men prepared. My stomach punch was evident, and I was worried about what I had gotten myself into.

We waited two more days before all bunks were filled. I was given a translation amulet charged at breakfast by one of the magicians who healed injuries. His name was Damian, and I made efforts to befriend him. I thought it wise to be on friendly terms with the man who literally held your life in his hands. With the amulet, it was great to talk to others freely finally. Most of the men in our 100-person barracks were here because they, like me, had opted to be soldiers rather than laborers to pay off their crimes. Most of the crimes were not as petty as mine, though, with lots of murderers and assault cases.

The amulet only worked when it was around my neck, so I was able to take it off and start to parse the language. I spent most of my free time connecting the words and developing a vocabulary. I think the language was related to English, so I rapidly added it to my mental dictionary. I was unsure if it was because I was a foreigner, my demeanor, or that I just did not speak the language without the amulet, but I had difficulty making friends. After two days of relative freedom, our barrack was filled, and our training began.

We had seven trainers who also served as wardens. One of our group tried to escape the second night, and he was promptly put on trial and executed. The follow-up speech by Silas, the Legion commander in charge, was not pleasant: "You leave the compound without permission of an instructor, and you will be executed. Know that you can not run. Our mages," he indicated seven men in a row, "will track you in minutes. You choose to be here to atone for your crimes." He made a hand motion, and one of the trainers grimly slid a long, pointed dagger under the chin and up into the brain of the violator. The defiant look on his face turned to horror as he died. I promptly vomited and was not the only one.

The scene made me have second thoughts about my choice to join and erased all thoughts of escaping myself. Ten months of hard labor was probably a better alternative. The dead man's bed was promptly filled with another recruit. There were seven barracks. Each with 100 bunks. When a barracks was full, the 7-month training began, usually on the first of the month. Each barracks had seven trainers, and a large estate building housed all the command staff. I wasn't sure how many command staff there were, but Damian, who lived there, said it was over 100, not including attendants. There were also more than the seven mages who had been on display at the execution, but Damian said their number fluctuated between ten and fifteen.

On the first morning, we ran with weights before breakfast. Then ate a large meal. Then, we had a lecture that sounded mostly like propaganda to me. Our seven instructors schooled us in hand-to-hand combat after the lecture. We were told if you lose a tooth, save it, and the magician can heal it back in place, but that they would not waste aether in regrowing it. After hand combat, we had another meal. Then, we were schooled in sword forms. We had to learn seven sword forms, each with seven segments. We practiced with weighted swords, striving for perfect movements. If we were good, they would give us a heavier sword.

After a few hours with the sword, we spent time with one of the instructors. Each one taught another weapon, dagger, axe, crossbow, short sword, two-handed sword, spear, and polearm. They told us our goal was not to master another weapon but to learn enough to know how to fight effectively against someone with these weapons. So, we rotated every day between instructors in groups of 15. After the cross-weapon training, we did some more fitness training till sunset. Then we had a shower fed by an aqueduct, received healing if needed, and more food. We had two hours to ourselves before the sun set and darkness filled the barracks.

The first few days, I had trouble moving. My body just stopped responding to the intense fatigue. The instructors did not scream and yell at me like in the movies. Instead, they offered calmly worded threats that I would be sent to the regular army if I could not keep going. That seemed to motivate the other men, so I also forced myself to continue. Convicted men in the army were usually sent to the front lines and used as fodder. At least, that was what the instructors told us. I pushed to keep myself from that fate.

Most of us slept for our free two hours. I, however, noticed one of the only two women in our barracks of 100 practicing with a staff. Her name was Helena. I befriended her after some effort. The other woman in our group usually moved

from bed to bed at night, whoring herself out for favors. Helena trusted me after a few days, and I spent my evenings gaining proficiency with the staff. Getting my abused body to do the extra training was not easy, but I was finding a mental resilience to the pain.

At night, before going to sleep, I always tried my damndest to charge the medallion myself. If there was magic in this world and I had a wisp of it, then I could make it work for me eventually. After two weeks of this, I think I was starting to feel the aether, but I was unsure.

My body was broken repeatedly during training—literally. We had good healers to repair our injuries. Torn ligaments, broken bones, concussions, cuts, internal bleeding—all of it was repairable with magic if they got to you in time. I got healing just about every day and found myself starting to become numb to the pain—which one of the instructors told me was the point. It was a hallmark of a Legionarie, fighting on when his body was broken. At least now, I was able to function relatively normally with a broken arm.

After three weeks, we were tested on the tablet again. Fourteen of our 100 washed out after the test and were sent to the regular army training camp. Some of us were surprised, but after I talked with Damian, I found out the amount of resources needed to train members of the Legion of Lion was ten times that of the regular army. This meant Commander Silas liked to cull the groups early. He explained this allowed our instructors to focus on the more promising soldiers.

Damian, one of the dozen magicians administering the test, let me peruse my results on the tablet after my reading. Most of the other soldiers just had their results copied and sent away. Making friends with the man had been a boon for me.

Physical	Mental	Magical
Strength (+10/+0)	31/79	Intellect (+0/+0) 25/54
Power (+7/+0)	29/82	Reasoning (+2/+0) 35/59
Quickness (+2/+0)	18/49	Perception (+1/+0) 45/60
Dexterity (+3/+0)	17/55	Insight (+1/+0) 19/48
Endurance (+11/+0)	41/87	Resilience (+0/+0) 40/71
Constitution (+3/+0)	22/65	Empathy (+0/+0) 9/21
Coordination (+7/+0)	17/60	Fortitude (+6/+0) 30/87
		Aether Pool (+0/+0) 7/21
		Channeling (+1/+0) 3/55
		Aether Shaping (+1/+0) 1/8
		Aether Tolerance (+0/+0) 19/50
		Aether Resistance (+0/+0) 3/19
		Prime Aether Affinity Space
		Minor Aether Affinity Time

My physical stats had made good progress. I was more curious to see my magic skills, which had barely moved, but still, they had moved! So the hour I

had spent every night in bed trying to charge my amulet had done something. It gave me the motivation to continue the effort.

After the tablet reading, we had a large round of combats over three days to rank the remaining 86 members of the squad. I placed 48th in hand combat, 37th in sword combat, 77th with daggers, and 29th with sword and shield. It had been the first time we had been given a shield, so I thought I did well.

Then, in a sort of awards ceremony, the top three placers in each combat got a minor essence of strength or power for a reward. The small marble-sized balls that were dark purple or orange, which the winners eagerly consumed. What is an essence? From Damian, I found out there are two effects of essences. One that could raise your potential in stat and one that could raise your attribute without having to bust your ass in training. The bottom three performers were sent to the army camp, reducing our barracks number to 83 after just three weeks of training.

Talking to Damian, I found each minor essence costs between 1 and 20 gold coins depending on which stat. Physical stats were the cheapest, while magical stats were the most costly, and mental ones fell in between. Generally, it took between 10 and 30 minor essences to raise force a stat up one point without training. Unfortunately, minor essences usually have no effect once a stat reaches half of a person's potential unless the individual also trained.

There were also major essences that were about an inch in diameter. These could help raise stats to about 80% of your potential without having to train. They were also ten times as effective at raising stats over minor essences, meaning you only needed to use 1 to 3 for an increase. According to Damian, major essences cost between 50 to 500 gold.

Finally, there were apex essences. They were the size of a golf ball but were very difficult to harvest, cost hundreds of gold, and could raise someone past 80% of their potential without training. More importantly, though, apex essences were the only thing that could raise your potential, the ceiling limitation of your stat. These essences were rare, expensive, and reserved for nobility. Using them on yourself was a crime unless you had permission from a noble.

I began the next three weeks of training extremely focused on improving my combat skills. The instructors noticed and gave me more attention in practice sessions. I didn't want to fall below the imaginary line that would have me sent

to the regular army. If I was going to survive in this world, I needed this training. I found my body acclimating to its new reality, and most of my body fat was gone after just six weeks.

The next tablet test, three weeks later, yielded good results for me.

Physical	Mental	Magical
Strength (+6/+0)	37/79	Intellect (+0/+0) 25/54
Power (+7/+0)	36/82	Reasoning (+0/+0) 35/59
Quickness (+3/+0)	21/49	Perception (+3/+0) 48/60
Dexterity (+1/+0)	18/55	Insight (+1/+0) 20/48
Endurance (+6/+0)	47/87	Resilience (+1/+0) 41/71
Constitution (+2/+0)	24/65	Empathy (+0/+0) 9/21
Coordination (+12/+0)	29/60	Fortitude (+7/+1) 37/88
		Aether Pool (+1/+0) 8/21
		Channeling (+0/+0) 3/55
		Aether Shaping (+0/+0) 1/8
		Aether Tolerance (+0/+0) 19/50
		Aether Resistance (+0/+0) 3/19
		Prime Aether Affinity
		Space
		Minor Aether Affinity
		Time

The tester only recorded my physical and mental stats, ignoring the magic column again. I had substantial gains in my physical stats. I was benefiting from all the weapon practices. My mental fortitude potential had increased from 87 to 88. I asked the tablet testing mage about it. It wasn't Damian this time, but my goodwill among the mages seemed to have spread.

He checked the records, "A single point in potential increase is not unheard of. The tablet's calibration could be off, or you could have just been on the cusp between values. You shouldn't worry about it. Don't be surprised if it is 87 on your next reading." I had waited to be last in line so I could review my scores, and the three mages administering the test packed up the three tablets they were using carefully and left.

Six people were expelled from our barracks after the tablet testing, bringing our number to 77. Rumor spread among us that the goal was to finish with 30 Legionnaires. The top 6 in our class would be sent to the capital to join the Royal Legion, and the remaining 24 would form a platoon under the command of a mage and be sent on missions across the Telhian Empire.

Combat testing was fairly intense this round as everyone realized they might not make it and have to go to the regular army. The army was considered fodder to hold the borders. Life expectancy was not very high. I finished 19th in sword ranking, 24th in sword and shield, 29th in dagger, and 9th in hand-to-hand. We were also tested on our marksmanship with the crossbow, and I finished 18th. Once again, prize essences were handed out to the top three for each event, and three more soldiers were cut—74 of us remained.

We, shockingly, were given a day off with our first in 6 weeks of intensive training finished.

Chapter 3: Beaten but Not Broken

Chapter 3 Announcement rewritten 7/23, working on chapt 4,5 and 6 soon (adding dialogue). rest of the story should be mostly good

On my day off, I spent my morning swimming in the lake that fed the showers at camp by a small aqueduct. I had made sure it was acceptable before I headed up to the lake, and one of my trainers confirmed it. There was a watchtower up there, and the two guards said I should just remain on the banks under it, and I would be fine. The last thing I wanted was to be executed for trying to escape.

I was sitting on the bank, admiring my fit body, and one of the mages came down to the bank with a fishing pole. Looking up, I noticed it was Damian. He had healed me many times and was usually the one who charged my translation amulet. We started talking while he fished.

“Damian, what is the difference between a spell form and actual magic?” I asked while he cast over and over, something akin to fly fishing.

He was very patient with me as he explained, “In order to cast a spell, a mage has to channel aether into a construct. A construct can be a physical device, a spell form imprinted on their aether core, or created in the air using their aether manipulation and manual dexterity. The last way is what defines a mage. Their control over their aether and being able to create temporary spell forms that they can channel aether into to generate a spell effect. Give me your translation amulet, Eryk.”

I removed the device and handed it to him while he put down his fishing pole. He proceeded to disassemble the device, showing six stacked discs inside. Each disc was complex runes. He assembled the device, orienting the discs on a tab, charged it, and handed it back to me. He continued, “You can see how difficult it would be to write out all six sets of runes, maintain their forms, and then channel aether to cast the comprehension spell.”

“Yes. I could maybe write one from memory if I studied it for a while, but all six?” I responded with a new appreciation of mages.

“There are some simpler spells with only three layers, but it is not just writing them with aether in the air. You have to do it fast enough that they do not dissipate and keep them all oriented correctly. Even if someone had a strong affinity, only one in a thousand of those people can control their aether and truly cast spells. Mages are highly valued throughout the world,” he sighed. “I am not a true mage. All my spells are spell forms permanently imprinted on my aether core.”

“Can anyone add spell form on their core to cast spells?” I inquired hopefully.

“Yes and no. It is actually not too difficult as it is mostly intent and will. But you do need to have a strong enough affinity with the magic. Generally, a score of at least 10 in the affinity to successfully imprint a spell form on your aether core. Less than that, it is extremely uncommon, Eryk.” He picked up his pole and continued to fish.

After a while, I asked, “So people generally don’t have affinities over 10?”

He looked over at me curiously, “Generally, everyone is tested when they are fifteen. Do they not do that where you are from?”

I remained calm and responded, “No, it is reserved just for the nobility.”

He nodded in understanding. “A waste. You never know where the next great mage might come from. But everyone always has some affinity for one of the magics. It is usually small, between five and six is normal. Secondary affinities are usually half of their primary.” He considered for a moment, “If you have never been tested, maybe your primary affinity is strong enough to create a spell form on your core. If you wish, I can try and obtain an affinity assessment stone when it passes through. They are expensive and usually only found in large cities.”

“I would appreciate that, Damian,” I replied with a hopeful smile.

He nodded and cast again, “I am actually quite well versed in the process. I can not create spell forms in the air but have seven different ones.” He held up his finger to demonstrate, and a steady flame appeared on it. “This is my fire affinity spell form. I only have an affinity of eight, so this was all I could manifest. Still, it is useful in lighting fires,” he smiled triumphantly.

His smile fell. “Your affinities were space and time?” I nodded. “Do not get your hopes up. They are rare magics, which usually means lower strength of the attribute.”

“How strong is your healing affinity?” I asked.

He smiled at my curiosity, “Generally, asking is impolite a person their affinity strength.” He grinned, “My healing affinity is 54. It is my second strongest affinity. My spell form can heal another person’s flesh, organs, and bones.” Damian was one of the best healers in the camp, and I had been administered by him many a time.

I pressed hopefully, “Can you teach me some basic aether shaping exercises? I have a potential of eight and would like to improve.”

Damian frowned, “I thought it was something like that. In order to create spell form and cast spells like a true mage, it is considered a requirement to have a minimum score of forty in aether shaping. My own score is twenty-seven, and my potential is only slightly higher. I spent years trying to learn spells and failed.”

Seeing my downcast expression, he tried to cheer me up, “You still might be able to create a spell form, Eryk. I will see about borrowing a tablet if it passes through. And I will teach you the two basic exercises for aether shaping as well.”

We spent the next two hours as a teacher and student. The two exercises were focused on visualization and meditation. Once you could feel the aether, you could manipulate it with your mind. It was late in the day when we finished, and I thanked him and returned for dinner since I had missed lunch while I was out swimming. I planned to double up on my calories.

I kept my routine over the next three weeks and could finally manifest the feeling of my aether in my core with the exercises Damian had imparted. It was difficult and mentally taxing. My control was crude, like kneading a dough ball in my core. My mental exhaustion didn’t help me during morning fitness training the following day, so I needed to temper my efforts.

The next wave of testing was upon us, and I was very curious to see my results.

Strength (+3/+0)	40/79	Intellect (+1/+0)	26/54	Aether Pool (+1/+0)	9/21
Power (+2/+0)	38/82	Reasoning (+3/+0)	38/59	Channeling (+2/+0)	5/55
Quickness (+2/+0)	23/49	Perception (+1/+0)	49/60	Aether Shaping (+3/+0)	4/8
Dexterity (+2/+0)	20/55	Insight (+6/+0)	26/49	Aether Tolerance (+1/+0)	20/50
Endurance (+3/+0)	50/87	Resilience (+2/+0)	43/71	Aether Resistance (+0/+0)	3/19
Constitution (+4/+0)	28/65	Empathy (+0/+0)	9/21	Prime Aether Affinity	Space
Coordination (+2/+0)	31/61	Fortitude (+1/+0)	38/88	Minor Aether Affinity	Time

The tester raised his eyebrows while writing down my new stats in the log. I again sneaked a peak at my magic stats and saw a great improvement. My next goal was to be able to charge my amulet by myself. I could now communicate in the common tongue without the amulet, but my vocabulary was still limited. It appeared the language was derived from Latin, but I was not a linguist. I found out the amulet cost 20 gold, and when I graduated, it would not be going with me, so I needed a good grasp of the language before then. Six more were cut after the tablet readings, bringing our number to 68.

Testing did not go as well as I had hoped. I finished 23rd in sword ranking, 30th in sword and shield, 25th in dagger, and 7th in hand-to-hand. We were also tested on spearmanship for the first time, and I finished 3rd. All of the practice with the staff and Helena had greatly helped. Helena was the only woman left in the barracks, and she was constantly harassed now. She was not in threat of getting raped because if she was, the man would have been executed the next day. She just had to deal with constant ‘requests.’

I would have helped her, but I was outnumbered and didn’t want attention on me. Some men had taken to sharing in each other’s company at night without a willing woman present. That was not my preference, and I hoped maybe after I graduated, I could find a woman. I used the intense training to keep myself distracted.

For finishing 3rd in the spear competition, I was awarded an essence! The awards were announced after three more men were dismissed, bringing our number to 65. I was worried as I was called to choose my essence. In the office of the high captain, I was asked which physical attribute I wanted a minor essence for. I thought about my shortcomings in combat. My lower speed and agility are what cost me the most during practice. So I needed to choose quickness, dexterity, or coordination. My lagging stat was dexterity, so I decided on that to increase my accuracy with my blade. The essence was a faintly glowing yellow pearl—maybe it was closer to the size of a marble. The high captain, seeing my confusion, said all I needed to do was swallow it.

I went outside and examined the ball for a long time. I imagined what kind of power was contained within and how much potential was stored in the small item. I needed this reward to make a difference in my combat skills. I swallowed and focused intently on it as it dissolved and entered my stomach. I focused on the electric shocks in my veins and nerves that caused my muscles to twitch for a few minutes. When it ended, I did not feel any different. I do not know if I should have expected more.

We had a day off again, and I hoped to meet the mage Damian again at the lake shore, but he never came to fish. I spent the next three weeks backing off of my magic training and getting more rest to focus on my weapon skills. I couldn't afford to slide down in the rankings and get cut. The threat of being sent to the regular army hanging over me kept me motivated. After being at the camp for 12 weeks, I went confidently to the tablet testing for the first time. I knew I had made ground on some of the others and was looking forward to weapon testing after the tablet.

Physical	Mental	Magical
Strength (+2/+0) 42/79	Intellect (+0/+0) 26/54	Aether Pool (+1/+0) 9/22
Power (+1/+0) 39/82	Reasoning (+0/+0) 38/59	Channeling (+2/+0) 7/55
Quickness (+1/+0) 24/49	Perception (+0/+0) 49/60	Aether Shaping (+0/+0) 4/8
Dexterity (+4/+1) 24/56	Insight (+1/+0) 27/49	Aether Tolerance (+0/+0) 20/50
Endurance (+1/+0) 51/87	Resilience (+0/+0) 43/71	Aether Resistance (+0/+0) 3/19
Constitution (+2/+0) 30/65	Empathy (+0/+0) 9/21	Prime Aether Affinity
Coordination (+3/+0) 34/61	Fortitude (+2/+0) 40/89	Minor Aether Affinity
		Space Time

I was happy to see my dexterity improve by 4 points. My dexterity potential even increased by one point. The tester recording my data seemed to pause when he got to my dexterity. He went and looked at my past reading and today's reading a few times before continuing to copy my stats to my records. My physical attributes had improved significantly, so I looked forward to the ranking combat. I wasn't surprised my magic barely improved. I usually just played with mana while I was taking a shit now, having given up on my hopes of becoming a mage. Also, the nightly sessions caused fatigue the next day affected my training. Today, I didn't pay attention to people being pulled out but noticed only 58 beds in the barracks were filled when we returned and were preparing for the sword ranking portion of the testing. With our numbers reduced, the testing was only going to take two days this time.

I finished 15th in sword ranking, 19th in sword and shield, 22nd in the dagger, and 5th in hand-to-hand. It was mostly thanks to my improved accuracy. Having trained with the same people for so long, I caught them off guard. We were also tested in the polearm for the first time, and I finished 11th. After

getting noticeable results I wished I would have earned another essence, but I didn't. If we had tested on the spear, I would have had a shot, but there were just too many guys ahead of me in the hierarchy of the other weapons. Only the bottom two soldiers were cut after weapons testing this time, leaving 56 of us.

So after 12 weeks of the 29-week training cycle, almost half of our number had been eliminated. Helena hadn't been cut but was near the bottom of the results. I talked to her about it, and she wasn't concerned. She let me know female legionnaires were rare and that if she made it this far, she was probably going to make it and get assigned to special duty guarding a minor female noble related to the ruling family.

We had another off day, and I ran into Damian fishing. I initiated a conversation, "Damian, do you know how we are eliminated based on our results?"

He considered what to say, "The commander decides based on the tablet testing. Sometimes it is the lowest summed physical attributes but not always. He talks with the trainers and removes men he feels will not be good legionnaires. If you are not working hard, then you are at risk," he advised.

"How am I performing?" I asked hesitantly.

Damian thought for a moment, "You work hard, but of the men, you are 25th or 26th in the summed physical stat pool rankings. At least three weeks ago, I think that was where you ranked."

My heart thudded. If only thirty men graduated, I was close to the body in my physical performance. Damian added, "The commander leans heavily on the weapons testing, Eryk. If you are in the top twenty for sword and shield, you will be safe from the tablet cuts the following tablet testing. The men sent to the capital to join the Royal Legion patrol the city and fight primarily with the sword and shield, so I think that is why he stresses it." That alleviated some of my concerns as I had decent skill with a sword now and just finished 19th in the sword and shield ranking.

Damian added, "The instructor and commander were actually discussing you the other day, Eryk. You made a sizable jump in your skill since the last testing." I nodded as I realized a lot of the had to do with the essence I consumed. It had given me better control of my blade. I could see why they were so valuable.

Damian returned to his fishing, thinking I was done asking questions. He caught two decent-sized fish while I relaxed in the cool air under the shade of a tree.

I came up with some more questions. I rarely had this opportunity, and my fellow soldiers were mostly ignorant. They were also assholes for the most part. It wasn't like a normal army where camaraderie was the goal. This legion training seemed to be about improving and outdoing your fellow soldiers. I asked Damian, "What are typical gains between readings for people?"

He looked contemplative and said, "Between 10 and 14 is normal after the first three weeks, then 6 to 10 each of the following testing periods." I considered I was doing ok then. I might have even moved up faster than most of the others. I thought I had improved by 13 or 14 points in this last period.

Damian caught a third fish and started packing up. He said, "I heard they plan to send your cohort on a little adventure. There have been some red goblin attacks at a village a hundred miles from here, and the commander decided you all could use the change of scenery. You are going out on a little training patrol." With that, he smiled, turned, and went to cook his fish.

Chapter 4: Magic Affinities

Chapter 4 Announcement rewrite on 7/27 still need to do 5 and 6

Well, the following day, we learned we were just taking our training on the road. It was 100 miles from where we were going. My squad had two woodsmen, two instructors, and two mages assigned to us. But they all rode horses while we spent our time at the fast march with heavy backpacks, leather armor, spear, sword, and shield.

When we stopped, we were either eating or weapons training. Sleeping outside was not fun either, as the temperature dropped overnight, and our packed bedrolls were only thin wool. We even had to spend 4 hours on night watch duty. The woodsman and instructors schooled us in those duties. I spent my free hours with the woodsmen as well. Helena was in the other squad, traveling a separate route, so I could not get additional staff practice. The woodsmen showed me basic camping skills and some foraging skills.

There were six plants I came to identify as edible, filling, and nutritious. Two were roots that had bulbs that could be found year-round, but you needed to peel and then boil them. Two were nuts from trees, a little uncommon, very bitter, and made your urine very pungent. Using the pungent urine to pee around your campsite at night would keep most wild animals from your camp. The last two edibles were sap from shrubs; both were very sugary. You had to be careful just to drink the sap from the hollow stem on one and not eat the stem, which would give you massive diarrhea. We didn't see any wild game on our outings, but he did show me how to identify game trails and animal passing.

It took five days to reach a farm that had been attacked. The mages and instructors rode out to question the farms nearby. We got a chance to rest, but I walked the nearby woods with the woodsman who had been instructing me. We found trails with humanoid prints. We were lucky as it hadn't rained and washed away the evidence. The woodsman guessed the farm had been attacked by 6 to 8 of the red goblins. We identified the direction they had left in by the trail of chicken feathers and footprints.

Soon, the mages returned with the instructors. The family that lived at the farm had moved to a neighboring farm for protection. We headed out with the two woodsmen leading the way. The going was fairly slow, and I was put on the left flank, 10 yards out, since I was slightly better at moving quietly. Another soldier walked the right flank. The two woodsmen and two of our best soldiers were in the arrowhead. The main body of the force trailed 50 yards back with the horses, mages, and our trainers ready to support.

One of the woodsmen hand-signed a trap to the lead element. We all stopped and waited. It was only two heartbeats later that all hell broke loose. Two goblins I didn't notice broke from my left less than 8 feet away. My first thought was that they looked more brown than red, then I got my wits about me. I interposed my sword and got ready to react.

I deflected the wooden spear aimed at me and put the goblin attacking me between the other goblin. This would give me one foe for a short time. I tried to bash the close goblin with my shield, but it had already backed away. The other goblin began to circle, and sounds of combat erupted from our center and right flank. I figured I would need to hold out for 15 to 20 seconds for our main force to close in. The two goblins I faced were 120 degrees apart and attacked in a coordinated lunge.

Using my shield, I cleared the spear on my right. The sword in my left hand mostly deflected the other spear. It cut my armor near my ribs but did not reach my flesh. But I was able to move forward past the spears. Now, between the goblins, I swung my sword in a short, powerful arc, clipping the head of the goblin on the right in the head and taking a chunk of the skull with the hit.

Using the swing's momentum, I came around quickly to face the other goblin with my shield. I saw anger and fear mixed in its human-like eyes. It hesitated, so I pushed forward, deflecting the spearhead down with a shield and using my sword to hack at its arms. I took off one of its hands, surprising both of us. As the goblin froze in shock, a quick slash to its neck ended its life. This all took less than eight heartbeats. I scanned the left flank, looking for other threats. Seeing nothing, I turned to help the center.

One of the woodsmen was on the ground with the two soldiers and the other woodsman protecting him. At least eight goblins had them half surrounded, with more goblins coming to assist. The main force was still about 30 yards back. My training was to fall in and support the center, but looking at the circling goblins, I rushed the flank. I started a heavy run and used my shield to barrel into one goblin, driving it into another. Unfortunately, my feet got tangled, and I went down in a mess on smelly goblin limbs. I felt a pain in my ass and assumed I had just gotten a spear in my left ass cheek. As I rolled away, I was able to slam the hilt of my sword into the eye of a goblin on the ground, crushing its orbital cavity. I had to release my shield or risk getting stuck on the ground in the tangle.

Standing, I backed toward my companions. The odds were better now: six goblins and four of us. The goblins had noticed our main force. The goblins coming to reinforce suddenly screamed, "Flee," and turned to run. I only understood the goblin speech because of my amulet. The six goblins turned and started to run. I jumped to pursue and cut down one immediately with a diagonal slash across its back. I took down a second slower goblin that had a limp and then paused, realizing I was alone. I had forgotten my training and pursued the goblins due to my surging adrenaline. I backed up and returned to the main force.

The mages came and healed the injured woodsman and our minor injuries. I had a puncture in my ass cheek and had bled a fair amount, soaking my pants with blood. My pain tolerance was high from the training, but getting the healing from Damian and drinking some fluid replacement was still a relief.

Looking at the goblin bodies, I felt mildly ill. I had killed a sapient being. I did not have to dwell as the instructors had us moving.

We soon formed a double deep line and moved forward. Ten minutes later, we came to the goblin camp. Twenty or so goblins were packing up what they could. Seeing us approaching, they fled. We charged when ordered. I killed two more in the chaos, but they were both females. The wizards shot lightning at a few goblins that had gotten too far away for us to engage in melee. In all, maybe three goblins managed to escape.

Then, one of the wizards took out a large magic runic shield and tried to suck essence out of the goblins. One out of five gave a minor essence. In total, he collected five essences from 27 goblins. I was quickly assigned to assist two woodsmen in tracking and killing the escaped goblins. Two other soldiers came with us. After six hours of pursuit, we managed to get only one goblin. The woodsman had us return in the moonlit night. The moon on this world was much larger than Earth, and its strong blue light made it feel like constant twilight.

We had been gone for over 10 hours, and I was exhausted and had bruises and numerous chafe marks on my flesh. However, I had no time to rest and was debriefed by the instructors upon returning. I got yelled at for my reckless and undisciplined attacks in the initial contact. After being told of all my errors multiple times, I was able to retire and quickly fell asleep after some cold stew.

I was able to sleep till mid-morning, mostly because the woodsman had asked not to be woken before then, which meant the three soldiers who accompanied them got the same treatment. I ate three breakfast portions. While I ate, I was next to one of the magicians. We got into a conversation. He told me about the loot they collected, "The big haul was four minor dexterity and one minor strength essence. The goblins had about sixty copper coins and some iron tools." He indicated the pile that had been assembled while I was hunting the goblins yesterday.

Damian added, "The coins and tools will be given to the farmer so he can replace some of his livestock."

"Is that the only way to make essences," I asked him, indicating the runic shield by the other mage.

The mage tapped the shield, "Yes, condensing life force from living beings or recent corpses. The collectors are expensive to artifice."

“Could it be used on a human as well,” I asked, with my curiosity getting the better of me.

Damian and the other mage gave me a strange look. Damian did answer, “Yes. Some cultures believe consuming the essence of your defeated foe is your right. Others believe it should be passed onto their children, and others think they need the strength to succeed in the afterlife in Pluto’s realm.”

“You said it could be used on live beings,” I asked the first mage.

He seemed uncomfortable with the question, “Do they not have collectors in your lands? Or you just from some mudhole in the wild!” He stood and walked away, taking the collector with him.

After he was a distance away, Damian answered my question, “It can be used on live creatures and has a much higher probability of forming an essence. It was outlawed in the Telhian Empire and is now only used to execute criminals.” He pointed at the mage, “He used to work in the big cities doing the executing. He has probably killed dozens of men with that collector in the last decade. Ripping a man’s life force from people changes you.”

I nodded in understanding. I had not quite come to grips with killing the goblins. It helped that they looked more monstrous than human. But as a soldier, I was going to have to eventually kill another man. I was not looking forward to that day.

I turned the topic to magic, “Can you tell me more about the magic affinities?”

Damian smiled and went into teaching mode, “There are three rarities of magic, common, uncommon, and rare. Each one has seven affinities for a total of twenty-one known magical affinities. Eryk, both of your affinities fall into the rare rank.”

“What are the rare affinities?” I leaned in close to listen

Damian smiled as he listed them: “The seven rare affinities were space, time, displacement, materialism, void, worlds, and convergence.”

He shifted to face me, “Space is primarily the ability to create pocket dimensions. Time is limited control over time, usually speeding up or slowing time around the mage. Displacement is the ability to teleport. Displacement

magicians are extremely rare and valuable in the Empire. They operate the portals in the larger cities.”

Damian paused to take a drink. He still had my attention when he continued, “Materialism is summoning objects from nothing, but it breaking the second covenant of magic that objects can not be created from nothing. There is a lot of debate that the objects are summoned and not created. Void magic is eliminating something from existence. It is extremely rare magic, and anyone with its affinity is sent to the Mage College in the capital for study. Now, world magic is the ability to move between planes. Traveling the cosmos like a great adventurer!” He dwelled for a moment on the idea of traveling between the stars.

“Finally, convergence is the rarest of all the rare magics. It allows a mage to draw mana from the environment, specifically at ley line convergences. Essentially, the mage could have an infinite well of aether under the correct circumstances and wield tremendous power!” Damian finished with a flare of his hands.

Damian stood and was about to leave, “Eryk, I know your strongest affinity is space. I do not want to get your hopes up, but if you successfully complete the legionnaire training, the commander is considering testing you to see if you can learn the dimensional pocket. Since you have a low potential in aether shaping, you would have to imprint the spell form on your aether core to learn it.”

“What exactly is a dimensional pocket?” I asked.

Damian nodded and continued, “It creates a private space from which a mage can put and pull items. They are usually small, but even a legionnaire with a small space could be enlisted as a royal messenger. But do not get your hopes up. When I can get a tablet, we can see if your affinity for space magic is at least ten.”

Damian reiterated, “Most people have affinity ratings under five in their primary affinity. It is one of the reasons they have not checked you. They assumed you would have been evaluated in your homeland and, if you had any potential, would have utilized it. I have not told anyone you have never been tested.” I was twenty-five, and it was common for people to have all their affinities checked when they turned fifteen in the capital or a large city in the Telhian Empire. Damian was called away to attend to an injury.

I was gaining a lot of benefits from my friendship with the mage. That he was willing to keep my secrets was a massive boon to go with the preferential healing he gave me. Unlike most of the other men, I had no scars from all the healing I had received while training.

It was a few more days before we packed up and returned to the training camp. We had no luck in locating more goblins. The instructors said they probably crawled down a hole to breed for the winter, and he would have to come back again next year. We learned the other squad had killed 48 goblins and lost three of their members. After returning, we had two days off and were tested again on the tablet.

Physical	Mental	Magical
Strength (+2/+0) 44/79	Intellect (+0/+0) 26/54	Aether Pool (+1/+0) 10/22
Power (+1/+0) 40/82	Reasoning (+2/+0) 40/59	Channeling (+0/+0) 7/55
Quickness (+2/+0) 26/49	Perception (+3/+0) 52/60	Aether Shaping (+0/+0) 4/8
Dexterity (+1/+0) 25/56	Insight (+1/+0) 28/49	Aether Tolerance (+0/+0) 20/50
Endurance (+5/+0) 56/87	Resilience (+1/+0) 44/71	Aether Resistance (+0/+0) 3/19
Constitution (+4/+0) 34/65	Empathy (+1/+0) 10/21	Prime Aether Affinity Space
Coordination (+1/+0) 35/61	Fortitude (+4/+0) 44/89	Minor Aether Affinity Time

I made modest gains for myself, but Damian said I was doing well, and as long as I didn't get myself killed, I would graduate. For weapons testing, I finished 11th in sword ranking, 18th in sword and shield, 22nd in the dagger, and 7th in hand-to-hand. I realized that two of the men killed had been ahead of me in the rankings. I learned they had done something foolish like myself, rushing alone into combat with multiple foes.

We were also tested in dual-wield sword skill, which none of us had familiarity with. I fished 11th. I liked this style because I could use my quickness to alter which hand was defending and which was attacking and surprise my opponent. I also found from all the training I was slightly ambidextrous. One of the trainers said I had the mentality for a two-weapon style, but they only taught it here, so we would be familiar with it if we faced an opponent wielding two weapons.

Three had been dropped after ability testing, and another five were cut after weapons testing. This left 46 of us remaining. The strange thing is we actually started forming bonds. Putting our unit against a common foe had broken down the walls of competition against each other. I don't know if that had been planned, but it made life in the barracks more bearable for me.

We had light training as our instructors had to travel to the army camp. We were not told the reason. Forty-two of the forty-nine instructors left for two days. Only forty returned, and even Damian was in the dark why. During the lighter training days, I had an opportunity. Damian excitedly said the estate had a magic affinity tablet. They were expensive, and this one was only going to be here for two days as it was on its way back to the Mage College in the capital. He conspired to bring it to the lake so I could check my ability in the space affinity privately.

His offer almost sounded like a trap, but I agreed. Damian brought the tablet and said, "I have configured it to display rankings of all the rare affinity magics. The tablet can only display the common, uncommon, or rare magics one at a time." He showed me how it was set to do so.

"Are you going to see my scores?" I asked as he carefully handed me the tablet.

He seemed to consider and, maybe judging by my anxiety, said, "No. You can keep the information to yourself."

"Then why are you helping me?" I said with confusion.

He seemed uncomfortable, "I am a bit of a loner. You are the first soldier in my time here who actually made an effort to befriend me. You are a decent person, unlike most of the men and women who come here to be a legionnaire as well." Well, score one for me for not wanting to die.

I looked at the tablet. It was much fancier than the general ability tablet. "Just like charging the amulet, push your aether into this section," Damian indicated. I did as instructed and looked at my scores. It took me time as I barely had learned the written language. It was similar to Latin, but it took me time to translate in my head.

I think Damian thought my concentration was due to disappointment. I looked up and asked, "What do the scores mean?"

Damian pursed his lips like he was about to break the bad news to me, "True mages usually have 3-4 affinities over 60, usually all in the same rarity category. The average person only has one affinity, around five. The higher the number in an affinity, the more power exponentially. Ten being base noted for as the recognized minimum to demonstrate power."

“So any magic affinity under ten is essentially useless?” I asked, looking at the tablet again.

Damian nodded, “A score of twenty is twice as strong as a score of ten. From there, the real power starts. A score of thirty is four times the relative power of ten. Forty is eight times. Fifty is sixteen times. Sixty is thirty-two times as strong.”

I interrupted to finish for him, “Seventy is sixty-four times as strong. A score of eighty is one hundred twenty-eight as strong.”

Damian held up his hand to stop me, “Correct! But maybe only one in 25,000 people had any affinity over eighty. Scores of ninety are unheard of and are two hundred fifty-six as powerful. Maybe 1 in a million would have an affinity at 90 or higher!”

“How do I clear my scores?” I asked. He showed me and I did so and handed him back the tablet. “Why was this tablet here?”

“A peasant girl was found with powerful elemental affinities. She was flying over the forest! Can you believe that! I heard she had fire, air, water, and earth all at 72! Can you imagine how powerful that girl is going to be one day!” Damian said excitedly. He asked the question solemnly, “So can you? Is your space affinity over ten?”

I nodded, and his eyes brightened, “Excellent! We can start working on learning the dimensional spell if you want. I can show you all the tricks I learned in my time imprinting spell forms.” He was extremely excited about the opportunity to pass on his knowledge.

After Damian left, I recalled my scores. He had never asked me what they were. The numbers were burned into my memory.

Space	98
Time	90
Displacement	61
Materialism	9
Worlds	88
Void	22
Convergence	74

Chapter 5: Secret Space

I met with Damian almost every evening as he guided me on the principles of learning a spell. He really thought I would not learn the dimensional pocket spell but instead utilize my innate ability to create a simple spell formation to create the pocket space. He assured me that as long as my affinity score was over 10, I could eventually create a spell form. Very few people with aether could actually learn the intricacies of memorizing and casting spells. It was also going to be a few weeks before a copy of the spell could be transported from the mage academy to him. He assured me he had sent the request.

As my training progressed with Damian, I missed spending my evenings with Helena and getting in some staff practice. Helena was very rough around the edges, but as I felt more and more comfortable in my new world, my human desires started to rise. The scarred and muscular woman that was Helena was looking better and better to me as she was the only woman I got to see on a regular basis. Her bed in the barracks was right next to mine as well.

Damian was a patient teacher. I think he was also very bored in his assignment as a healer to the training legion. His assistance was invaluable as, at my next testing, I had substantial gains in my magical development. My gains were so significant that the fort's commander was informed and called me before him.

Physical	Mental	Magical
Strength (+1/+0) 45/79	Intellect (+2/+0) 28/54	Aether Pool (+2/+0) 12/22
Power (+2/+0) 42/82	Reasoning (+2/+0) 42/59	Channeling (+2/+0) 9/55
Quickness (+1/+0) 27/49	Perception (+0/+0) 52/60	Aether Shaping (+6/+0) 6/8
Dexterity (+2/+0) 27/56	Insight (+2/+0) 30/49	Aether Tolerance (+1/+0) 21/50
Endurance (+0/+0) 56/87	Resilience (+1/+0) 45/71	Aether Resistance (+1/+0) 4/19
Constitution (+2/+0) 36/65	Empathy (+0/+0) 10/21	Prime Aether Affinity
Coordination (+2/+0) 37/61	Fortitude (+1/+0) 45/89	Minor Aether Affinity
		Space Time

He looked over the transcribed numbers on a piece of paper while I stood at attention. Then he spoke, "Soldier, how did you make such significant gains in three weeks?" His icy blue eyes focused on me from the sheet.

"During our free time after dinner, the healing mage had been helping me, sir." The commander was a very large man and shifted in his chair and pulled some more paperwork to him and read it.

“Do you think you can learn to create a dimensional space soldier before you graduate?” He asked sternly. I had absolutely no idea. I didn’t even know if I was close. I was hoping my ridiculous score in space magic would have helped by now.

“Yes, sir!” I said with confidence, even though it was faked. He nodded and looked at some more papers.

“Ok, you can work with the healing mage. Is it Damian?” I nodded. “Work with him in the morning as well as the evening. You can have the second daily conditioning phase off. There are three requests for a soldier with a dimensional storage ability or spell. One is from the first prince himself.” He looked at me again and focused on my amulet.

“I no longer require the amulet, sir. I have a basic understanding of the language.” I answered his question before it was asked. It would have been embarrassing for him to send someone who couldn’t communicate with his commander.

“You are dismissed. Damian will keep me updated on your progress.” I left the intimidating gaze of the man.

I didn’t see Damian for the two days of testing. I did much better than I anticipated. I finished 12th in sword ranking, 15th in sword and shield, 20th in the dagger, 9th in hand-to-hand, 4th in the spear. Although my rankings didn’t improve much, I thought my level of ability had closed the gap with those I had previously deemed far superior to me. I also had a feeling that the commander had tested us in the spear to reward me since it was my best weapon. I still missed out on an essence reward, though.

Damian still had not shown and I asked one of the other mages about it. He said Damian had been sent by the commander to retrieve a spell. He should be back soon. I immediately guessed it was my dimensional space spell. As training resumed, there were only 43 of us left. I had been preoccupied with my own problems that I didn’t notice the cuts from the tablet testing and the combat rankings. We were quickly zeroing in on the desired 30 graduates.

Getting the second half of conditioning off did not endear me to my fellow legionnaires. The special treatment actually meant I had to deal with more aggression from multiple directions during combat training. In the four days before Damian returned I suffered just as many broken bones and lacerations as I had in the previous nine weeks.

Damian appeared after dinner one night while I was working on my exercises by the lake. It was quiet up here and the other soldiers rarely came up here. He waived a pamphlet as he approached. "I got the spell and a more recent copy at that!" He said excitedly. We spent the evening going over the spell, and Damian explained things as best he could.

The best way to describe a spell was math. The aether wrote out the formula, and when you funneled your aether stores into it, you got the result. It meant magic had a massive range based on changing a few variables. During the rest of the interim testing, we worked on the spell, and I was actually starting to get an understanding of magic. It was an obscure understanding, but at least that was something. My progression was not good when the testing rolled around compared to my prior efforts.

Physical	Mental	Magical
Strength (+1/+0) 46/79	Intellect (+0/+0) 28/54	Aether Pool (+0/+0) 12/22
Power (+1/+0) 43/82	Reasoning (+2/+0) 44/59	Channeling (+1/+0) 10/55
Quickness (+2/+0) 29/49	Perception (+0/+0) 52/60	Aether Shaping (+0/+0) 6/8
Dexterity (+0/+0) 27/56	Insight (+1/+0) 31/49	Aether Tolerance (+0/+0) 21/50
Endurance (+0/+0) 56/87	Resilience (+0/+0) 45/71	Aether Resistance (+0/+0) 4/19
Constitution (+1/+0) 37/65	Empathy (+0/+0) 10/21	Prime Aether Affinity Space
Coordination (+1/+0) 38/61	Fortitude (+1/+0) 46/89	Minor Aether Affinity Time

At our next tutoring session, Damian revealed my scores put me at 28th in my training group. He told me I had dropped four positions from three weeks ago. The good news was the commander was very interested in seeing me learn a storage space spell. He would be in line for a reward if he produced such a soldier.

The weapons ranking went terribly. I was essentially gained up upon as my barracks shared information about my habits and weaknesses. I finished 22nd in sword ranking, 25th in sword and shield, 34th in the dagger, 14th in hand-to-hand, and 11th in dual wield. They made no secret of sharing my deficiencies among themselves, so much for building camaraderie.

Between the two tests, we only lost three, bringing us down to 37. If it was true only 30 could graduate, then it was going to be fairly brutal to avoid being one of the last seven cuts. I actually wished I had made an effort to make friends. The problem I had was everyone was kind of an asshole. They were here because they had either committed brutal crimes or wanted to be at the top of the food chain. Even Helena had her own air of superiority to her.

Fortunately, things finally worked out for me a week after we dropped our numbers down to 37. My space spell form initiated. I had obtained my dimensional space, and it was far more powerful than I could have imagined. A translucent cube would appear visible only to me and oriented to my person. Inside the cube, there was no gravity and no passage of time. If I choose to, I could cancel the space, and anything caught on the edge would be sheared off. Even if the space was active, I could actively allow objects to pass through so they wouldn't be aware of the space.

There were negatives. Keeping the space open cost two aether every thirty seconds, and that was the minimum I needed to spend on using the ability. So my pathetic aether pool of 12 made it somewhat limiting. When I ran out of aether the space closed no matter what.

I excitedly found Damian, "It works. I got my pocket space!" Damian's face showed surprise, followed by joy.

"How large is the space?" He asked. My space was large, about a 10 foot cube. I knew he would be impressed.

"How big do you think it is? What is a good size?" I prompted a response.

"A cubic foot would be exceptional! But six cubic inches should be enough to get you a messenger position." He said anxiously awaiting my response. I paused. The spell created a space of about a cubic foot so my space was about 1000 times that volume. I guessed it had to do with my 98 space magic stat. If I revealed this would I end up married to some princess? Or would I end up being enslaved to a king transporting illicit items for him. I decided to go for the middle ground.

"It is just over a cubic foot maybe one and half to a side." I said.

"We should go to the commander immediately! He will want to hear this! And he will probably test you to confirm what you are saying is true." Damian was bouncing all the way to the manor and kept telling me to hurry up.

In front of the commander, it was as he said. I was tested to confirm that I did in fact, have a space the size I mentioned. His smile grew as everything was confirmed. I also found out that I was even more fortunate. Because the space was formed as a spell form ability and not a spell, it was permanent. If I had used a spell, then my link to the space could be broken and the contents lost. Now, the only way to destroy the items in my space was to kill me.

The commander spoke, "The prince's request has already been fulfilled. The other two requests in the kingdom are still open. I will send word of your potential and wait to hear back." He seemed giddy as he started writing the letters. I imagined he was in line for a sizable bonus. "There is great news for you. Once your assignment is approved, you will be promoted to full legionnaire under the Lion's banner. You will start receiving payments. Of course, we should get you fitted for your legionnaire's gear. You were probably not told, but your salary will be withheld to pay for the gear. Seventeen gold in total." My jaw dropped. The was astronomical compared to the 20 silver I owed the farmers. "Don't worry about it. You are gifted a full set of gear on your 5th anniversary. So if your gear is intact, you will get the coin back. You will probably earn more than 5 silver, 40 copper as you will be a specialist as well."

I did the rough math in my head. That 17 gold was over 310 weeks of pay! I didn't know if I should be angry or not. As we left, the commander and Damian tried to soothe me. "Don't worry. You are allowed to take loans out against future pay up to 5 silver a week. The equipment payment is just to let you know that it is owned by the kingdom and not yours until you complete five years of service." That did make me feel slightly better. "So keep it in good order and don't borrow too heavily. The interest rate is small over five years it does add up." He finished.

Great, I was in a kingdom that was aware of how to use compounding interest against you!

The next day, during training, the commander came out and watched. It was the first time he did, and everyone was trying hard to impress him. When my opponent got a head strike on me, causing a bleed and conclusion, the instructor rushed and reprimanded him. This left our group stunned. This had never happened before. I was now valuable to the commander. Damaging his little piggy bank was off-limits.

Four days later, Damian found me after breakfast. "Word just came down. You are going to be assigned to Master Mage Castille." He didn't seem too enthused by this.

"So what is the problem?" I asked, sounding worried.

"She is a bit of a problem solver. She takes on the most difficult assignments. Her legionnaires are top tier, but their mortality is somewhat high due to the dangers of the missions they undertake." He finished.

God fucking damn it! I was assigned to the suicide squad!

Chapter 6: The Long Road

I was sized for my legion armor. The tailor was a bit handsy, but it fit perfectly when I got the armor three days later. The commander pulled me from training, and Damian spent time with me in the morning going over my duties for mage Castile. I was to be a porter for potions and the unit funds. Since dimensional spaces did not have time progression, I would be carrying an array of various potions for the mage. I would still be expected to fight, but only at the mage's side. The only good news he could find is the unit allowed each soldier to use their preferred weapon.

Most mages in charge of a unit had everyone wield the same weapon, so they looked uniform, but Castile wanted her unit as effective as possible. The rest of the news was not good. Mage Castile typically replenished 6-8 legionnaires a month—a fairly high fatality rate. My orders came, and I was to make the best speed to the Agorian front to connect with my unit. I would be traveling with part of a regular army detachment headed to the front. I would be the only legionnaire in the group.

I was marching alongside 124 men down a dusty road two days later. I was wearing my new leather armor, and soon the rubbed shininess was covered in dust, and my sweat and body odor muted the fresh leather smell. The captain of the army unit moved to walk beside me, and we talked most of the first day of the march. He informed me we had about a week of marching before reaching our destination. He also freely shared what he knew.

The Agorian front was the border of our kingdom and the troll lands. It wasn't the trolls that required constant subduing though, it was the marsh goblins and troglodytes. The trolls bred slowly while the other two races bred prolifically, and surging populations attacked the border every few months. When I asked why we didn't eradicate the source, he said the land was mostly swamps and useless to humans. Also, there were so many underground marsh settlements. Eliminating them would be dangerous, and they would miss some and breed back to a nuisance over time anyway.

My legionnaire kit had a small personal tent, a cook set, rations, and a bedroll. All the equipment in the backpack weighed over fifty pounds. Walking in the new leather and carrying the backpack had me achieve new pains and chaff

marks in places I cared not to discuss. We camped outside of towns at the end of a day's march. I wanted to fill up my dimensional space with my kit but thought it best not to advertise my ability.

I was able to eat from the soldier's meal cart and conserve my hard rations. Due to this, after setting up my tent the first night, I moved the ten pounds of rations into my dimensional storage, lightening my pack nicely for tomorrow's thirty-mile march. The food wasn't too bad. Some type of sweet cabbage with potatoes and celery. Minimal salt seasoning, but it still was filling.

I was up and packed at first light, well before the soldiers. Even though they were not carrying backpacks, they were in much rougher shape than me. Complaints flew freely when the officers were out of earshot. I just kept to myself, not wanting to put in the effort to make friends I would never see again.

The captain chose to walk with me again the second day, and I made an effort for a conversation by asking him about himself. Captain Lucian was the third son of a career army officer. His father commanded a garrison in one of the large cities. He was young, and this was his first command. He was going to command the overnight watch at one of the forts along Agorian swamps. It was an easy assignment, according to Lucian. After one year and he would be recalled. I asked Lucian what was a hard assignment then. He told me about the active war fronts. The constant skirmishes with the other human, elven, and orc kingdoms. Defending and expanding those borders was a constant sink of soldiers.

I asked him if women were allowed in the army like the legion. His response was calculated. It had been tried but always failed eventually. The legion had more discipline and did a much better job of policing themselves. That was all he said on the subject.

The days on the road started to blur. I spent my nights alone in my tent and, oiled my armor, sharpened my two spears and short sword. I practiced what Damian had taught me. I wished I had another spell to work on. I did have high affinities that I could try to manifest a new ability. My displacement affinity was at 61. Displacement was essentially teleportation. The problem was Damian had told me teleportation magic took a lot of aether to use, and aether was one thing I did not have.

On the third evening, I started practicing with the spear. It was best not to get too rusty. Captain Lucian came over and practiced with me. He was good

from ten years of experience. I was still able to hold my own. When we switched to blades, he far outclassed me. Thankfully the captain was open to teaching me, which I appreciated. The soldiers watched us as we practiced, but if they were not ordered to train, they would just rest from the long day's march.

Six days and nearly two hundred miles, the sprawling fields and woodlands transformed into dead wood and foul-smelling stagnant pools. We had reached the edge of the Agorian Swamp. We reached a square wooden fort on the morning of the seventh day, but the fort the soldiers were going to was a larger central fort another tent miles down the road. That was where my orders had ordered me to report as well.

The pace picked up as the destination after long days of march was close. The end meant rest to the men. The central fort was massive when we approached it. It had forty-foot-high stone walls. Stone walls in a swamp indicated there had been a lot of expense in building this fortification. It was massive inside as well. The bailey was filled with two-story buildings that were civilian businesses. Captain Lucian described the lower part of the fort as having enough variety to keep a thousand soldiers happy and collect their free coin.

Captain Lucian pointed out a stone building near the citadel on the far side of the bailey. "That is your destination. The legion offices for the fort. Every military fortification has a legion office, but this region rarely sees members of the legion, so I am not sure what is inside."

I walked the shops slowly before heading up the incline to the Legion building. Two brothels, a general store, three taverns, and one inn. The businesses were active with off-duty soldiers. I had no coin, so I moved to meet my new commander.

The symbol of the Legion of the Lion was on the door. When I entered, a middle-aged woman was in commoner clothes behind a long bar. A few tables were in the room, and only one table had two men in worn and aged leather armor. One graying man pointed at me, "Are you the raw trainee porter?" He asked gruffly.

I nodded slowly, as I figured out that described me pretty well. The other man stood, knocking his chair to the floor with a thud. He drained his tankard, "About time. Magus Castile left two days ago for Formica, a large mining town

nestled north of here in the Ironspine mountains. I will get the horses ready. We will leave shortly.”

Still a little in shock at the informality, I was silent. The first man to speak was looking at me, evaluating me. He finally said, “Elaina can bring you back to the storage room. Resupply your pack and take anything else you want. Castile is not someone to be kept waiting, so be quick about it.”

I did not tell them that I did not know how to ride a horse. I figured I could figure it out on the way. I had gone on a trail ride or two as a kid. The woman motioned me to the back room, unlocked a heavy door, and then left me. I went inside and found two rows of deep shelves stocked with everything a soldier could possibly want. I turned back, and she was gone. Could I just take anything I wanted? Would I be charged for the items like my armor? Was there some type of registry? I slowly closed the door and started walking the aisles. One aisle had foodstuff, and the other aisle had clothing, gear, and weapons.

I didn't have much time, and I was told to resupply. That seemed like an open-ended order....

Chapter 7: Welcome to the Legion

I looked at the door a few times before deciding to go for it. The forty-foot-long corridor had two wide aisles and deep shelves packed with gear. A lot of the gear had a layer of dust. I grabbed two large Legionnaire backpacks and went to the provision aisle first. My dimensional space was immune to the passage of time, but all these items already had a long shelf life. The shelves were neat and orderly as I started filling the two packs.

One 5 lb sack of peppercorns, three 5 lb bags of sea salt, five jars of berry preserves, six 5 lb sacks of flour, two large bags of dried mushrooms, two large bags of potatoes, a bag of onions, two massive blocks of hard cheese, a dozen thick links of hard salami as large as my forearm, two 10 lb bags of sugar, four sealed jars that I was fairly certain were yeast

After checking the door, I moved both of the stuffed and extremely heavy food backpacks to the dimensional space. Then I grabbed two more backpacks and went to the clothing aisles.

Two heavy black oiled cloaks used as rain gear, Two heavy black wool cloaks with soft linen linens used for warmth, two heavy wool blankets for horses, six underwear, one dozen pairs of wool socks, six light undershirts, four linen pants, six leather belts, two pairs of boots that were already broken in

The clothes were bulky and filled the two backpacks, so I sent them to my dimensional storage after rechecking the door. At the end of the aisle, were large twenty-gallon casks. Most were marked as water, but a few were marked as rum or whiskey. I looked at the doorway again. It was still closed. I shifted one rum and one whiskey cask into my dimensional storage and then two water barrels. I only had enough remaining mana to open my dimensional space one more time. I thought it best to conserve it even though I wanted a lot more in this warehouse.

I suppose I should actually carry something out as well. I grabbed a satchel and a few more things, a black leather bound book with lined sheets to use as a ledger, small vials of ink and quills, a bag of apples, and a large bag of candied nuts to snack on.

I walked down the weapon aisle, adding some knives for cooking and two nice short swords, when the soldier poked his head in, "You ready? The horses are out front." I nodded and hustled to him.

"Do I need to show what I took?" I asked, indicating the room.

"Nah, not out at a crappy outpost like this. Most of the shit in here is spoils of war. The legion patrols the trade routes north of here, and stuff just finds its way here. In the larger cities, you need to be more careful. Marta just lets us take whatever when we come through here."

"I thought her name was Elaina," I asked, walking out with him.

"Elaina and Marta both run this outpost for the Legion. Marta is a retired legionnaire. Elaina is her daughter," he informed me.

I followed him outside, and the other legionnaire was already mounted. The man who had come to get me mounted a horse, leaving me a large red mare. Two large empty saddle bags were draped across the rump. The two soldiers started laughing as I tried to mount the horse, still wearing my backpack, and satchel, and holding my spears. Finally, the older of the two said, "Wylie, help him, or we will never leave."

The younger man came off his horse and helped me fill the saddlebags and secure my spears, and three short swords so I could mount the horse. Wylie said, "This is a fine mount, well trained. I sense you are not familiar with riding. Firth will not have the patience to wait, so I will do the best I can to teach you as we go."

I was soon uncomfortably in the saddle and trotting out the fortification. I asked Wylie, "I didn't know the legion rode horses."

"Most don't," he replied. "You need to move with the horse, become one with it. Otherwise, you are going to have a miserable ride." He spent the next hour teaching me on the ride how to handle the reins, move with the horse, and guide it with my heels. The horse was definitely well-trained. He picked up the earlier conversation when he thought I looked somewhat capable on the horse.

"The legions are not real fighting units. We are more guards for the royalty and mages. Our charge is Master Mage Castille," Wylie paused, considering what to say, "She has a bit of a chip on her shoulder. She takes on the dirty missions and gets things done."

I decided to broach a concern, "I heard that the fatality rate among her legionaries is high."

Wylie winced, "Yeah, you could say that. There are twenty-six of us. The veterans have been around for a while, but the raw recruits tend to get themselves killed or severely injured. You don't need to worry, though. With your ability, Castille will keep you out of the most intense combat—maybe."

I shifted in my saddle, starting to get uncomfortable and finding no way to alleviate it. Firth turned to us and had a grin I didn't like, "Let's teach the boy a light canter." He spurred his horse forward, and Wylie shook his head and followed.

When I got my own horse moving, I was bouncing around like crazy. I could not find the new rhythm. The weapons, although secured, were swinging slightly and tapping my back. When Firth mercifully stopped, my inner thighs were burning and cramping. He motioned for us to get off and walk. I collapsed to the ground, unable to hold myself up as my legs cramped uncontrollably. Firth chuckled, and Wylie smirked slightly, "Don't worry. You will get used to it. Firth isn't the bad sort. That was just over an hour. He will let you walk it out and do it again." And we did.

I fed my mare an apple from my satchel every time we went walking. I named her Ginger after her reddish-brown coat. She was definitely well-trained and seemed to like the name.

The swamps began to fade into scrub plains, and mountains appeared in the distance. Firth turned and said, "Sorry, recruit. We are going to push to Formica to get there before dark."

The town was a sprawl of buildings with no wall surrounding it. A large pen of horses were on the edge of town. That was where we went. Firth commanded, "Show the recruit how to care for the mounts." He then turned and left for one of the larger buildings.

Wylie showed me had to unsaddle and groom the horses. Also, where to look for chafe marks to treat with a salve. It took almost an hour to do the three mounts. I gave Ginger an apple which caused all the horses to line up requesting one as well. I had to cut the apples into quarters to get all of them, and I only had three apples left when I was done. Wylie had left me after he had trained me.

It was late in the evening, and I guessed I should head for the large building that Firth and Wylie went to. Entering it, I found a large common room. Legion soldiers were lazing about and drinking. I did not see either of my road companions, so I asked the nearest legionnaire where I could find mage Castille. He looked me over and pointed to a door in the back.

I knocked on the door, and a harsh female voice said, "Enter!"

I opened the door to find a middle-aged woman hunched over a map on the table with two legionnaires flanking her. She gave me a hard stare, "Yes?"

"Legionnaire Eryk Marko reporting," I said somewhat uncertainly. As my training had been cut short, I had never gone through the protocols or etiquette for someone in the legion.

"About time. Adrian, go get the company's potions." One of the men left the room and the mage paged through some sheets on the table. She finally stopped at one. Looked at me and said, "Fourteen inches?"

I assumed she was referring to the size of the space. That sounded about right. I nodded. She continued, "Good. Your most important job is to hold the potions for the unit. They will not lose their efficacy in dimensional storage.

Also, you will hold the unit's funds and accounting logbook for unit pay and expenses."

The man she had called Adrian returned. He had a small black wooden chest and placed it on the counter. He opened the chest and pulled out wooden slotted trays. The potion vials were round with a large cap. On the cap was a lot of script. I didn't have time to examine it before I was ordered to place the two trays with 25 potions each into my space.

I did so, and after they disappeared Mage Castille smiled, erasing the age lines on her face, "Excellent. Adrian, get the unit's ledger and chest." The man left once more and returned with a much heavier chest. "Eryk add these," she ordered.

Much like the potions, the coins were seated in trays, like poker chips. One tray was full of large gold coins, and the remaining five trays were small silver coins. I did my best to estimate how much a 16-inch cube could hold and not get over that amount. The thin ledger was last, and Castille watched me hawkishly as I added the book.

With everything in my space as a tight-fitting cube, I looked up at the smiling mage. "Excellent, now retrieve one of the blue-green potions," she ordered. She held up her hand, "Just the one potion." I thought about it, and she gave me a hint, "Search your dimensional storage with your mind. Choose just the item you want to bring out—highlight it if you will. I can tell you are opening your entire dimensional space every time you put an item in. That is a massive waste of your stored aether."

I was getting a lesson in magic. I only had about 12 aether and had used two aether every time I accessed my space. I did as she asked and focused on the tray of potions and then just the single potion. I reached out and willed that one object out of the dimensional space. It appeared in my hands.

I smiled brightly, realizing I had done it and used only a fragment of the aether, much less than before. Before, it was like I was opening a closet and routing around it. This was closer to just reaching it and taking the object off a shelf. Much more efficient.

Mage Castille smiled as well, "Good work. Practice removing and placing potions. In battle, you should not hesitate in pulling the correct potion." Her face went serious, "Adrian, here is our logistics officer. If anything is missing from the unit funds or potions, then you will be accountable."

“Come, kid,” Adrian said. “I will get you settled.”

I was almost twenty-five, so I would not say I was a kid, but I did not argue. He introduced me as the unit’s new porter in the large common room. A lot of eyes studied me. I had the unit’s money and healing potions, so I was definitely a person of interest.

We went upstairs and into one of the rooms. Two bunks were in here, “The army usually uses this building, but Castille kicked them out. Get some rest; we leave at first light.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“We are looking for a Baron’s son in the mountains. His little adventuring group was hunting for a griffon nest. Wanted to give his father a griffon egg for his birthday. Instead, we are probably looking for his remains,” Adrian told me truthfully. He smiled, “Don’t worry, only one nesting pair was spotted in this region. It’s not like we will have to deal with a flock of the buggers.”

He left, and I went and picked up my backpack and got my bedroll. The bunks were just planks, no mattresses. I rolled it out and undressed. My thighs were raw from the ride, and the muscles knotted. I tried to rub them out, and two fellows entered the room. Their things were already on bunks.

“Damn, mate, if you need some time alone, we will be back in half an hour,” one of the men said.

The other guy laughed, “Half an hour, Felix? I bet this one just needs five minutes.”

“I am just trying to loosen my muscles. It was my first time riding. Name is Eryk,” I tried to end the banter.

“Just joking. I am Mateo, and this is Felix. We are to keep an eye on you and help you settle in. Adrian said you were raw and even pulled before you finished training?” He sat on the hard bunk.

“Yes, I was shipped off as soon as I got my dimensional space,” I continued to stretch while talking.

Felix spoke next, “Well, you got into a fine unit. It has a bad rep due to our high mortality rate, but that is mostly the new recruits,” he put his hand over

his mouth like he was saying something secret. “Don’t worry, Eryk. We will keep you safe and sound.”

They set up their own beds and were soon lying down. I took out the candied nuts and started eating. It was late, and no one offered me a meal. My two roommates took liberties, and soon the nuts were gone.

We talked about the unit; the best part was that Mage Castille had her own siphoning shield for the essence. She kept all the magical essences for herself but rewarded the men of the legion with all the physical ones and some of the mental ones. The men were also paid six silver a week instead of the normal five silver and forty copper. Although, Felix seemed to think that was mostly due to Adrian wanting to make his bookkeeping job easier.

I ate an apple before falling asleep and wondering what tomorrow would bring.

Chapter 8: Bulette for the Win

Felix woke me, and I tried to stand. My legs would not cooperate, and I collapsed to the floor and used my arms to pull myself up. Mateo chuckled at my discomfort. I slowly got my legs working and could feel every raw area of skin from yesterday’s ride. Felix offered some advice, “Use the horse salve on your chaff marks. It smells mighty pungent but works just as well on you as your horse.”

I started packing up, but Felix stopped me, “No need. We are just going along the range to the south and looking for signs of the griffons. If we are lucky, someone will spot one flying around, and we can trace it to its nest.”

I shambled outside and saddled my horse Ginger with some help. Setting the girth straps took some skill. Too tight, and the horse would get chaffed. Too loose, and you were not going to remain in your saddle. Breakfast was a meaty mashed potato porage. Only fifteen men rode out with mage Castille. Mateo explained, “The others will also ride in the other direction looking for signs. This is our second day searching. The griffons were last seen about nine days ago taking a sheep from a farmer.”

I wanted to cry when mage Castille took our column to a heavy gallop. My body was being pounded day after day and had not had time to heal. I wished I had a healing spell instead of a stupid dimensional space spell. Thankfully

after about six miles, the road ended, and Castille slowed her horse to a walk as we remained parallel with the mountains. Now at a walk, Felix could talk to me again.

“Damn, Eryk. If I didn’t know better, I would say an ogre was making you his bitch by the look on your face,” he chuckled as a few others heard and laughed at his joke.

I responded in a clear voice, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were an expert on the subject.”

After the men processed, the laughs started raining in, and mage Castille turned around to see what was so funny. It was Adrian who spoke nearby, “The raw recruit just gave Felix the verbal beating of his sad life.” She just nodded and focused forward again. It was a good amount of time before things calmed down. We were all looking to the mountains for signs of the griffon.

Another soldier spotted a carcass that we rode toward and dismounted. Five legionaries moved to make a perimeter. I wasn’t sure what to do, so I followed the mage and four legionnaires to the carcass. One of the legionnaires knelt close, and I got just close enough to get a whiff. Visually I could handle the sight, but my olfactory senses were unprepared, and I quickly vomited my breakfast. Apparently, losing my breakfast was not unexpected. The others looked green but held it down. The kneeling man spoke, “Four days old...good chance it was one of our griffons. It ate the organs and chewed off a haunch. Probably to bring it to the nest.”

I got enough of my faculties back to move upwind and asked, “What the hell was that?” I was talking to myself, but the tracker stood and answered me.

“It was a stone bear. Fairly common around here. Maybe 1200 pounds. Most likely killed by a strike through the spinal cord at the base of the neck from above,” he spoke, and I moved close, and he spent time explaining what details led him to his deductions. Everyone else had wandered back to their horses, and Castille looked to be considering what direction to head.

We were riding a short time later on the same path, and I ate my last two apples and gave the cores to Ginger. It was mid-day when our troupe stopped for lunch. Everyone had packed a small lunch except for me. My roommates had told me to leave my gear behind, but I was supposed to pick up a prepared meal from the unit’s cook—I didn’t. At least I had my satchel and

had some apples earlier. Mateo took me to stand sentry while everyone relaxed, and the horses drank water at a stream coming down from the mountains. Seeing my predicament, Mateo gave me some slices of sausage and cheese from his own lunch. I took a few drafts from his canteen as well.

“So, how long will we search for griffons?” I asked as he explained how to maintain the watch and which direction I should be focused on based on the other sentries’ positions.

“Castille doesn’t give up. She is probably using divination magic every few hours. She will find either the griffons or the body of the baron’s son,” he said. He suddenly stood and focused on something in the distance. I looked where he was looking. The ground was surging into a mound about a quarter mile away.

“What is that?” I asked softly. Mateo blew a whistle around his neck. I guess I needed a whistle. Everyone looked where Mateo pointed.

The mound started moving toward us. A few seconds later, we were rushing to our mounts. Mage Castille was screaming, “Bulette! Get on your horses and spread out. Make for Formica!”

I mounted a nervous Ginger and started galloping back the way we came. What the hell was a bulette? If it was scarring the mage, then it had to be bad. I didn’t have anyone to talk to as our group was spread wide apart as per orders. I looked back, and the damn thing was getting closer.

Many of my companions were pulling away...all of them were. I was dead last, I urged Ginger to a run, and she complied, sensing the danger coming at us. I tried desperately to find a different riding rhythm at a faster pace. At least my surging adrenaline completely muted the pain. My growing fear made it hard to focus, and I started bouncing out of synch with my mount. Ginger leaped expertly over a large shrubbery. When she landed, I went forward, not ready for the jarring landing. I do not know exactly what happened next other than I was on the ground rolling, and Ginger continued to race away, now free of her passenger. My first thought was I had given her all those damn apples, I thought we were friends.

I stumbled to my feet. I was alone. Everyone was at least a quarter mile away or more. I turned to face the mound of earth moving toward me. Something that resembled a shark fin emerged in the center. Was this an elemental earth

shark? I pulled out my only weapon, a short curved dagger in my belt. All my other weapons were secured to Ginger.

The ground erupted in a shower of earth and stone, and a massive creature was flying through the air and planning to crush me. Time seemed to slow as my death was clearly before me, my muscles paralyzed at the sight. An armored quadruped that looked a mix between a rhinoceros with a massive head of a snapping turtle soon blotted out the sun. I met my fate by opening my ten-foot dimensional cube, waiting as long as I could, and then shifting as much of the bulette's underside into my dimensional space. The earth thudded around me, everything went dark, and I was covered in fluids and knocked to the ground by the force of impact. I was alive and inside the cavity of the beast.

The beast seemed uncertain about what had just happened. Its mass twitched around me, and it tried to move. I had gutted it, though. I was trapped in its hollowed chest cavity, but the beast no longer had essential organs—like a heart. My dimensional storage would not activate as the cost of pulling in so much bulette flesh had drained my aether. The fact that either mass or a creature resisted being forcibly pulled into my storage was good to know—albeit after almost being crushed. After a short time, I started digging in the earth with my dagger to tunnel my way out. Thankfully the fluids softened the earth and made it feasible to quickly gain my freedom before suffocating.

I squeezed out under the hard shell and looked at the armored beast. It was a lot bigger than I remembered. The beast had an armored hide, short stubby legs, and massive black digging claws. It reminded me more of a tank than anything else. I could see why the mage had decided to retreat.

I oriented myself to the mountains and started walking back to Formica. When I had recovered enough aether, I dumped the 10x10x5 section of the bulette on the ground, spreading out like a squelching deflating balloon.

I did not think bulette blood was considered a good topical agent for all my raw and bleeding chaff marks. I came to a wide stream and decided to wash up. I remained vigilant as I stripped naked and began the process of cleaning everything. I focused on my leather armor as I had plenty of clean clothes to charge into. I managed to scrub almost everything out of the material. It appeared our uniform was treated with something that made cleaning blood out of it easy.

This got me thinking about a lot of the clothes I had taken at the fort. They all were well-worn, so I guessed they had come off of dead legionnaires. As long as they were clean now, I could handle the thought of wearing a dead man's clothes. When I finished, I dressed in my damp clothes and armor.

The bulette stomach had occupied the top half of my dimensional storage and had not disturbed all the other things I had placed in my dimensional storage. It was getting close to sundown as I sat on a rock, wet, tired, bruised, abused, and—alive. I took out a ration bar and munched on it, getting prepared to leave when Ginger came trotting up to me and drank unconcerned at the stream next to me. I shook my head, “Oh, now you show up! Well, I am out of apples.”

Chapter 9: Riding Lessons

As I rode back to the mining town, my clothes and armor dried off. The blood acted as a great detergent, and my clothes smelled nice and earthy—although I presumed not all the fluids that had soaked me were blood. Ginger seemed to be expecting an apple to return to me, but the only thing I had that she might enjoy was a jar of berry preserves. When we paused, I fed her the jam, and her long tongue cleaned the heavy jar clean. It was about two quarts of jam, and my horse definitely had a sweet tooth.

I did not see anyone from my legion as I walked Ginger back to town. When the town came into view, a rider came out to meet me. It was Mateo, “Damn, Eryk. You are alive?”

I fished for a response, “Yeah, got thrown from my horse and made my way into a river. The ground shark-turtle thing did not seem able to swim. It eventually left me alone, and my trusty mount returned to me.” I patted Ginger's neck.

Mateo was speechless. He just looked me over and finally said, “Mage Castille has called in an earth mage to help. For now, we are fortifying the town. You can rub down your mount, get something to eat, and see Adrian for your defense position.”

He rode back to the town next to me and continued, “The other detachment found the griffons. They are nesting about 20 miles north into the mountains. No sign of the baron son's party yet. We can not make a move until the

bulette is sorted out. Those things are a menace, and it is surprising that this one is so close to the mountains. They usually hunt in the plains or along the border of dessert since the earth is softer, or so Castille says.” He admitted, “I do not think she has actually fought one before, though. They are quite rare.”

I remained silent as we got closer to the scent of cooking meat got my stomach rumbling. Mateo pointed out where the townsfolk were setting up and the building where Adrian was organizing the defenses. I rubbed down Ginger and grabbed something I would describe as a thick pita filled with roasted veggies and thinly sliced meat. I ate as I walked to talk with Adrian. It almost felt like I was a veteran after just one day.

Adrian quickly brought me down to earth, “Eryk, you fell off your horse? Castille would have found your corpse and killed you again for that. Since you are alive, you will not be joining the defense. Instead, go see horse master Lucien. He will train you nonstop until he is satisfied you will not fall off a horse again.” The pita stopped halfway to my mouth. He turned and walked smugly to a fortification.

I walked the defenses and knew all this preparation was worthless as the bulette was dead. Not something I was going to tell everyone and reveal my secret. I grimaced at the thought of endless riding when I was already walking bull-legged, and my inner things burned like a merciless fire. I took the advice of using the horse salve on my raw and partially scabbed skin. It felt like putting alcohol on an open wound, and I was sure it would leave a scar.

Lucian was not a kind man. Every second of daylight, I was learning to care for Ginger or riding her. My body was never going to heal at this rate. What irked me the most was that Ginger loved all the attention even though I was suffering. I even found some apples in town to give her; as Lucien said, a happy horse was an ally. I was starting to gain some semblance of skill at grooming, riding, and farriering. After three days of horse torture, the earth mage finally arrived with his apprentice.

The man looked like a typical wise wizard with a long white beard and heavy robes. I was currently learning how to jump while mounted under Lucien’s strict guidance when he arrived and was told to take a break. I watched as the wizard rode in on a white stallion, and his young female hooded apprentice had a small black mare.

They went right in to see Castille. Lucian muttered, "Guess we will be leaving in the morning. Rub her down and get some rest." I gratefully rested in my bunk alone and napped for the remainder of the day.

The unit was assembled in the morning, and Castille said, "We are leaving on a dangerous mission. Bulette are a scourge. None of you have fought one before, but they are faster and stronger than should be possible for their size. They can jump forty feet in the air and crush you in an instant. Their jaws can cut you and your horse in half in a moment." She let her diatribe sink in. "These two earth mages are going to turn the earth to stone and trap the beast. We will not have much time to get spears forced under the armor plates before it breaks free. Be decisive and attack when ordered. I will attempt to blind the monster with darkness and fire. That is the plan. Mount up!" Castille swung up to her horse and led the way. She certainly emanated confidence.

The earth mages were right behind her. I was ordered forward to ride in the lead element. All the soldiers around me were extremely tense, so I tried to match their nervousness. As we walked, Castille spoke, "This is Legionnaire Eryk. He escaped the bulette by going into a river. He said the bulette would not follow him in."

The white-haired mage's eyes went up, "True, the beasts don't swim but do not fear water. Like rock turtles, they just walk on the bottom due to their density."

Had I just been caught in a lie? I tried to roll with it while not telling a lie, as I knew mages had such spells from when I first arrived in this world. "I can just tell you from my experience. The beast emerged from underground, and before I realized it, I was soaked. It left me alone after that."

The old mage seemed to contemplate my words and just nodded slowly. Mage Castille made introductions, "This is High Mage Dacian. He is one of the Empire's most powerful earth mages, if not the most powerful. He was just telling me this was his sixth bulette hunt." Great, I had an expert on bulettes dissecting my story. I bowed my head slightly toward him but did not change my story.

Lucien came up from behind, saving me from further scrutiny, "Eryk, I want you to practice sprints with your mount over the uneven terrain." I gave the middle-aged man an exasperated look but turned to do so. I think he took pleasure in administering drills that hurt my body—although today, I did not feel quite so beaten as my body was recovering quicker.

The procession made a steady walk with everyone tense and on the lookout for the bulette. At this pace, I was not even sure if we would reach where I left the carcass. After Ginger built a light lather, Lucien had me stop my sprinting practice. Adrian came up next to me, "Eryk, Horsemaster Lucien said you are doing a fine job. Mage Castille has decided you are to remain under his tutelage for the foreseeable future." I let out an audible groan.

Lucien reached over and patted my back, "Do not worry. Once Lucien has trained your horsemanship to a suitable level, you will just be helping him take care of the mounts."

"Do I at least get an increase in pay?" I asked, but it was just banter. This legion unit seemed much more informal than I was expecting, more like a group of mercenaries.

"Sure, if Lucien dies and you take over the role of horse master for the unit. You make as much as a second already," Adrian stated. A second was like a lieutenant, directly under mage Castille in the command structure. Adrian and Delmar were the two unit's seconds.

"How much does a second make?" I asked, having never actually been told how much my pay was.

"Castille pays her men six silver a week. If you have been with her for five years, it is eight silver. Delmar and I earn ten silver. The company's magical porter earns ten as well. The horse master, arms master, and armor master make an additional one silver a week." Adrian spoke conversationally. He then added, "Castille is generous, Eryk. You will have the opportunity to be rewarded essence for exceptional service." He rode away.

My roommate's had already told me about the essence bonus. As it was getting close to dusk, we finally spotted the corpse of the bulette. We all spread out at half a mile, but soon mage Dacian ended the prep and rode forward. The unit followed. Basketball-sized beetles were swarming the bulette.

Mage Dacian swore, "Pig-fucking marrow beetles. They will have ruined the carapace. It also looks days dead, no chance of an essence." He looked pointedly at mage Castille.

Castille asked the older mage, "What could have killed it?" She ignored the high mage's anger and scanned the skies. "Definitely not a griffon. Dragon, maybe?"

Dacian calmed quickly, realizing perhaps another apex predator was around. He said, "The dragons should all be in the southern reaches as it is mating season. No, whatever killed this bulette probably surprised it. Besides the bite marks in the shell from the beetles, I don't see any damage." He walked around the corpse, sending earth spikes through the beetles, clearing the outer shell of them.

After two circles, he spoke again, "At least the claws will be salvageable."

Castille dismounted, "I apologize for dragging you out here for nothing High Mage."

He waved her off, "It happens. It wasn't a false alarm either."

Castille offered, "Since you were unable to get an essence from the bulette, maybe you want to join the griffon hunt?"

The old mage looked up perplexed, "No, I don't think an old earth mage would be of much help." He looked at his apprentice, "Apprentice Renna. Go with mage Castille. Try to learn something about running a detachment of soldiers."

All eyes turned to the cloaked young woman. She pulled down her hood to show shoulder-length red hair and crystal blue eyes. She might have been attractive except for the scowl and her paleness. She did not protest, "Yes, Master Dacian." I had flashes of his padawan talking to her Jedi master.

Dacian turned to Castille, "I am traveling back to Varvao. Send her there when you are done with the griffons. She has potential, so make sure nothing happens to her. Once she is trained, the Emperor has plans for her. She has strong affinities for all four of the elements." Dacian mounted and road away just like that.

I remembered the story of the peasant girl with high affinities in all the elements. I guessed this might be the girl as she looked in her mid-teens. But that had been a few months ago. How much could she have learned in such a short time? She did not look happy being left behind. Castille turned to the unit and eyed all of us. She pointed, "Felix. Mateo. The girl is your responsibility."

Felix rolled his eyes and surprisingly talked back to mage Castille, "I thought we were watching the raw recruit?"

Castille's eyes narrowed, "You can watch both pups. Do a better job than one almost got himself killed," she pointed at me. It seemed discipline was relatively lax in the company.

We spent four hours freeing the claws to be sent to High Mage Dacien in Varvao City. Then we all returned to the Formica. A very perturbed red-haired young woman now occupied the open bunk in our room.

Chapter 10: Renna

When we got to the bunk room, Mateo asked Renna, "Top or bottom, your mageness?"

The young woman did not appreciate his humor, ignored him, and took the free bunk above mine. She opened her satchel and pulled out two large tomes. Although I had gotten a lot of experience speaking the language, I only recognized some basic words. The alphabet was somewhat similar to what I was used to. Most of the letters were written strangely, but it was close enough for me to read, albeit extremely slowly.

On examining one title, it was a book about learning how to learn spells, and the other text focused on manifesting innate spell forms for your affinities. Renna was focused on the second, so I asked, "What affinity are you trying to develop an ability for?"

She looked at me with some surprise. "Earth. That is why I am traveling with master mage Dacian. I already tapped my air ability. Once I gain my earth affinity ability, I will be assigned to fire mage next."

I asked, "Were you the young woman with all those elemental affinities over seventy for the four elements?"

Renna smiled shyly, "I can not believe I am famous enough for even a legionnaire to know who I am."

"I did not know your name, just that there were a number of people excited about your potential." I tried to keep the conversation going as Renna seemed to back away, "What ability do you have with your air affinity?"

She had a bright smile, “Flight!” My roommates were quickly interested in the conversation, asking her dozens of questions and overwhelming her. She admitted her ability gave her flight as fast as a horse, but her aether stores only allowed about 20 minutes of flight.

“That is still amazing. All I can do is store items in a dimensional space,” I responded.

“You are a porter? That is rare!” She looked dubious suddenly. “Show me. Make something appear out of thin air.”

I pulled a tray of coins out, watched her eyes bug out, and put them back. My roommates also had magic envy—or maybe the tray of large silver coins was a lot of money for them.

“How big is your space? Do you have any other abilities?” She asked, sitting next to me on the lower bunk, now interested in me. She was sitting really close to me, so that our hips touched.

My face felt hot, and I thought Mateo was going to say something, but I gave him a hard glare, and he kept quiet. I answered her, “A man never reveals his size on the first date. And I don’t have any way to learn a new ability. I had the help of a spell book for the dimensional space.”

“I was given a tuning stone,” she reached into her satchel. “Just channel your aether into it, and the stones will light up if you have an affinity over 15. That is considered the requirement to manifest an ability.” I remember that Damian had said the cut-off was 10 to learn an ability but did not challenge her knowledge. Renna reached into her bag and produced a circular disc. Three circles were inscribed on it, and each circle had seven gems. I wanted to use it but not in front of everyone.

I asked, “What do the gems represent? I mean affinity-wise.”

She pointed at each one as she explained, “The inner circle is the rare affinities, the middle circle is uncommon, and the outer circle is common. This book lists them all, and these are the associated stones.” She went through and identified all the stones.

Shaping Magic (Rare)

Space

Time

Displacement

Materialism

Worlds

Void

Convergence

Unaffiliated (Uncommon)

Charm (Mind)

Illusion

Clairvoyance

Protection (Guardian)

Necromancy

Celestial

Abyssal

Elemental Magic (Common)

Fire

Air

Water

Earth

Lightning (Energy)

Spirit (Healing)

Nature (Plant)

Renna smirked and took the device, and I felt the aether leave her into the device. It was the first time I had felt someone else's aether, and I think that was because our bare arms were touching. The gems that lit up for her were Fire, Air, Water, Earth, and Nature. Five of the elemental magics. The air stone also pulsed over and over again, almost like it was blinking.

Renna pointed at it, "That pulsing means I have already developed an ability with my affinity. Flying around the woods does get you noticed," She mused. She handed me back the disc. My roommates also seemed extremely interested in my effort and craned their heads.

I made a sad face, "I am still learning how to channel my aether. I can not activate devices yet," I lied.

Renna put the device on my pillow, "You can practice tonight. The disc is quite durable, so don't worry about breaking it. Do not lose it; I have to bring it back to Master Dacien."

A loud knock at the door came. Delmar, Castille's other lieutenant, entered. "Now that the bulette crisis is past, we are back to the normal routine." My roommates groaned, and I was not looking forward to the next. "Weapons training will be done two hours before dinner. Eryk, you are still raw; no weapon specialty was noted on your paperwork. What do you prefer to fight with?"

I hesitated momentarily, "Dual wielding short swords against humanoids and a spear against monsters." Delmar's brow creased, but he nodded as a smile formed. Felix slapped his forehead like I was an idiot.

Delmar said, "Not a dumb one then, eh? Fine. Three hours of practice for you, Eryk split time between the two. Firth can teach you the spear, and Konstantin can work with you on your dual wield." Mateo winced like he had been punched.

After Delmar left, Mateo said, "Firth is an ok sort. Konstantin is a real piece of work. One of the best fighters in our platoon. He does not talk much and hates working with others. His last sparring partner died in the Cyclops campaign. He volunteers for solo scouting missions, and we are all grateful for it."

A short while later, I geared up and went outside with two short swords and two spears. As I entered the training yard, the platoon was training with their weapons in an orderly fashion. I was surprised as everything we had done so

far seemed to be done nonchalantly. This was serious practice. I was directed to a man matching my height and whose biceps matched his thighs.

“You are the raw recruit? Let’s see if you can learn enough not to get yourself killed then,” the gruff man intoned. He was not a bad teacher. He was extremely strict and did not like to repeat himself. I learned more in 90 minutes from him than I learned in three weeks at the training camp. I had bruises and shallow cuts to mark every time I did not follow his instruction in detail. I was told to see the company medic before my spear training.

We actually had two medics, Linus and Malcolm. Malcolm was more of an assistant. He gave me some of the horse salves for the bruises and large leaves for the cuts. They smelled like peppermint and acted like an antiseptic for infection, held in place by a wrap after they were soaked in hot water. Unfortunately, they would not prevent scarring. I really wished we had a healing mage in our company.

Firth had me work my spear on a makeshift training dummy. He went over the common tactics for attacking beasts and defending myself. He was not as good an instructor as Konstantin, as he believed in repetition. My hands were already callused but still ached and bled slightly after a few hundred parries and thrusts.

I took a large bowl of mostly meat stew to my room to eat lying down as standing was painful. The room was empty, and I quickly used the tablet. I channeled my aether, and it glowed brightly. As expected, the inner circle had six gems glowing. The only one absent was materialism.

The middle circle had a single gem lit. It was the protection (guardian) rune. That meant I had over a 15 affinity in that magic sphere. The outer ring also had one gem glowing, and it was the most joyous sight I had ever seen. It was the spirit (healing). I could manifest an ability to heal. My eyes quickly returned to the center ring. The space gem was flashing, which was expected because I had manifested my dimensional storage space. A second gem was also flashing, indicating I had manifested another ability or spell-like effect.

It was the convergence gem that was flashing. Convergence was the magic affinity that dealt with drawing power from ley lines—at least, that is what I was told. I heard steps in the hallway and stopped channeling aether to the device. My convergence affinity was 74, so that meant I should have a powerful ability but what was it?

