Chapter 3 Beaten but Not Broken

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. Constructs come in three forms. They can be a physical device with an embedded spell form like the amulet you are wearing. They can be imprinted permanently onto a person’s aether core, although each affinity can only accept one such inscription. But what really defines a true mage is the last method. Being able to create a spell form in the air using aether manipulation and manual dexterity. However the spell form is created, once you have it, you only need to channel aether into it to generate the spell’s 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 comprised of 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 forms onto 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 spell forms inscribed on my core.” 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, it is impolite to ask 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 to 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.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Physical |  | Mental |  | Magical |  |
| 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 danger 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 | Space |
| Coordination (+3/+0) | 34/61 | Fortitude (+2/+0) | 40/89 | Minor Aether Affinity | 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, affecting 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 attriubtes but not always. He talks with the trainers and removes men he feels will not be good legionaries. 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 bottom of the hierarchy 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.