

“Many Delvers may act as though their exploits are limited to conquering Delves and clearing out inhuman creatures from around villages and new settlements. That is the dream of the naive, and of those who wish to portray themselves in an overly flattering light.

“So, we end up back where we started. Yes, Delver blades can cut through normal armor with ease, but give me a Tanker in full dark iron, and a swordsman will struggle the same as a mundane soldier against a knight in plate. Mages will struggle as well, given the nature of dark iron and the sheer fortitude of a tanker. But a well-trained fighter wielding a hammer... Well, fuck that Tanker and the soon-to-be-broken legbones he rode in on.”

“What about the fight with Demarsus? From what I saw, Myria was doing a good job poking him through his armor.”

“Sure. Myria is very good with an accurate, agility-based technique that exploits an enemy’s weak spots. However, Demarsus would have rolled over us if we’d relied on him bleeding out from those attacks. The thing that turned the tide of that fight was your crew creating a distraction, and then me hitting him in the head one good time with my hammer.”

“I see.”

“And then Myria casting *Dominare*, of course. But, the helmet would have stopped that spell if I hadn’t cracked it. You’ll also notice that Demarsus was primarily focused on me. He knew I had a better chance of ending the fight than Myria.”

“I thought he just had a hard time seeing Myria, with all her camouflage and such.”

“That too.”

I felt like Lito was... maybe giving himself a little extra credit here.

“Since our ultimate goal with a hammer is to be prepared for armored opponents,” Lito continued, “then there needs to be a good reason that we aren’t using the biggest hammer possible. Bigger hammer means heavier strike, more force traveling through the armor, and enemies that are *more* dead than they would be otherwise. For myself, I prefer a one-handed hammer because I combine it with a shield, and also augment my attacks with fire.”

He summoned his translucent blue shield.

“This is a spell called *Aegis*. It has a low mana cost, can be summoned and unsummoned at will, and can change shape to suit my needs.”

The shield narrowed into a more pointed shape in the direction of Lito’s fist.

“I can swing the hammer with my right hand, then shield bash or thrust with my left as a follow-up. Having something in your offhand also creates a counterbalance for the weight of the hammer. The alternative is to use a two-handed hammer, where I would focus on hitting the enemy with as much force as possible.

“So, the reason I say that you’re starting from an odd place, is that you’re wielding a one-handed warhammer with nothing in your offhand. That creates potential issues with your sense of balance, and also wastes the utility of your left hand.”

“Ok, I think I follow. The reason I’m doing it this way is to keep one hand available for spells. Maybe also have my wand in my offhand.”

“You don’t plan on using a shield at all?” said Lito, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s still early days. I don’t know enough about shields to decide if I like them or not. I just know that I want to focus more on magic. The hammer is an extra option, and I need a hand free to cast.”

Lito stroked his chin as he considered. He then pulled a new hammer out of his inventory that was slightly longer than the three-foot steel hammer I held. It was deep blue in color, with a semi-translucent exterior that gave it the appearance of pure ice that had all of the air squeezed out of it by pressure. The kind you’d see within a glacier.

“This is *Arbitros*. It’s a hammer I used for several years during my early career. It’s made of frozen steel, which is a material crafted by the Yonaks in the depths of Mittak. The material is unique, since it is worked and forged at a temperature cold enough to kill most humans in seconds. Whereas heat will harden the metal. That made it ideal for me at the time, since I could use my *Firebrand* skill without melting it. It does become brittle if it’s made *too* hot, though.

“This would be considered a two-handed weapon for a mundane human. However, with a decent Strength, it can be wielded in one hand without trouble. The material is heavier than steel or Madrin, but lighter than dark iron. The metal is rich in mana, so it bypasses the mundane resistance of Fortitude without any weaves. I could never decide what weaves to give it, anyway. By the time I’d saved up enough to get what I wanted, I was ready for an upgrade.”

He tossed the weapon to me. I caught it roughly in the crooks of my elbows, nearly dropping the steel hammer I already held. It was a lot heavier than the one I was using. I released the steel hammer, letting it drift back to its inventory slot along the wall, then took up Arbitros in two hands.

“Consider using a hammer that benefits from being held in two hands, but which is light enough for you to use one-handed with a high enough Strength score. That way, you can focus on two-handing the weapon when not casting for maximum impact, then swap to a one-handed style when you want to sling spells, without having to change out weapons.”

“That... sounds like a pretty good idea,” I said. “This is the sort of thing that would be impossible without all the magic shenanigans of Delvers, right?”

“It’s not uncommon to use a hammer this way, but most warriors would focus on a one-handed weapon, wielding it with two hands when they wanted additional force. We can go in the opposite direction by focusing on a two-handed weapon, and wielding it with one hand when needed because we’re just that fucking strong.”

“As opposed to having an impossibly *big* hammer, that no mortal man might wield?”

“Yes.” Lito pulled a long rod of iron from his inventory and held it over one shoulder. “Now, we need to start with the basics. I’ll show you the forms, watch you execute them, and issue corrections when you fuck it up.”

I glanced at the rod.

“In what way will you be issuing these corrections?”

Lito gave me a small smile and tapped the rod against his shoulder. This wasn’t the empty smile that he’d given me when we met outside the Creation Delve.

No. In this smile, I saw joy.

The corrections were him hitting me. Though, he wasn’t just beating me up when I got something wrong, he used the rod to swat at different parts of my body when my form was sloppy. A slap to the knee when it was beginning to collapse inward during a warrior stance. A snap at my shin when my stance was too wide or too narrow. A knock to my elbow when it sagged. A smack to my back when I slouched.

At first, the strikes didn't hurt much, but Lito quickly wised up and felt out my pain threshold with an expertise that was worrying. Why was he so good at figuring out how to hurt me without *really* hurting me? His strikes would do one to three damage each time. Enough to really sting, but not enough that I hadn't recovered completely by the next time he swung the rod.

The instruction was long, grueling, and slow. He forced me to take every action at the slowest pace possible, allowing me to move faster only once he'd deemed my form acceptable. Even then, if I displayed any sloppiness he would knock the speed back down. Over and over again.

Slow motion swing.

Beaten mercilessly until form was "acceptable".

Slightly faster swing.

Beaten mercilessly and forced to return to slow motion swing.

Slow motion swing.

Beaten mercilessly...

And so on.

I fucking learned a LOT. I cannot express how insanely effective this was, even though every brain cell I had told me it was dumb as hell. Maybe I was just a freak that responded to negative reinforcement in an atypical manner. The item description of my *C'thonic Leather Vest of the Dirty Muffin Toy* sure as hell seemed to think so. Maybe the System understood me in deeper ways than I understood myself.

Fuck. That sounded weird. This wasn't a sex thing, I promise.

Still, a single day of practice wasn't enough to make me a hammer-wielding master. At best, I understood the most basic forms and moves, and the most common pitfalls and bad habits to avoid when executing them. It would take a lot of practice to engrain that into my mind. Plus, we'd focused entirely on the two-handed style. I wouldn't have the Strength to properly one-hand the weapon until at least ten.

"You're a quick learner," said Lito.

"I *do* have a decent Intelligence score."

Lito grunted in his Lito way.

“I’ve found that high INT gets in the way of most people when developing physical skills,” he said. “They overthink things, try to engineer a way around the rote, have too many ideas to ever commit to one technique, or just get bored and find something else to do. It can be a boon when used well, but few possess the temperament.”

“Eh, thanks?”

“We’re not levying any accolades after one day of practice. Even if it was a twelve-hour session.”

“What? How much time?”

“We’ll probably dock at Arsenal in the next couple of hours. You can hold onto Arbitros for the length of our mission. If you like it, I might sell it to you. I’ve just been holding onto it for sentimental reasons.”

“Thank you, Lito Sensei.” I gave the Guardian another bow.

“You should grab something to eat. Maybe clean up. You sweat a lot.”

Now that he mentioned it, my undergarments were more water than cloth at this point. Twelve hours? Geez. We never took a break. I never even had to pee.

Wait. Gods above, tell me this is all actually sweat.

liiiiiit’s clobberin’ time!

What? Think we were going to make an M.C. Hammer joke? Please, we’re more refined than that. Our humor is elevated, beyond reproach, at a level unachievable by organic lifeforms! You might even say that... you can’t touch this.

Break it down!

You may now acquire the intrinsic skill: *Blunt Weapons*

***Blunt Weapons:* You gain +1% damage and +1% armor penetration to all attacks made with a blunt weapon per level of this skill. This skill may be specialized at level ten, narrowing its scope but granting additional benefits to a specific class of blunt weapons.**

Also, since you did *hammer curls* for twelve hours you gain +1 STR!

The System's attempt at stand-up hurt me worse than Lito had. Regardless, the skill was definitely worth picking up. Hopefully I could get Lito to show me a technique that used some of my massive reserves of stamina.

With that bonus point to Strength I was at nine. Just one more point and I'd get an evolution. It almost inspired me to start doing bodyweight squats on the spot.

But, Lito was right. I needed food and the ship-board equivalent of a shower. That is, a bucket of cold water and a rag.

After dealing with my corporeal needs, we still had an hour or so left before making landfall. I decided to take some time to go and check in on everyone's favorite alien and incomprehensible intelligence, Grotto.

The rest of the team was outside of the Closet for the moment, so I moseyed on through the locked and reinforced door to the obelisk chamber without having to engage in any skulking. I hadn't so far needed to deploy any of the excuses I'd planned for explaining what was behind the door. These ranged from the generic explanation of "that's my man-cave" to "that's my personal collection of men's undergarments, both vast in quantity and meticulously curated." I'd also considered making a false closet literally full of skeleton, hiding the real door to the obelisk, but figured that'd raise more questions than it answered.

Grotto and I also had disagreements about where to acquire the skeletons.

The obelisk at the chamber's center had noticeably grown with the new layer applied by Grotto, and was about fifteen feet tall at this point. The mini-c'thon hovered near the edge of the room, a series of unfamiliar symbols scrolling by on the wall. As I approached, I realized he'd modified a small section to serve in a similar manner to the slates used by the Hiwardian Delver officials. The characters etched themselves into existence, then slid down along the slate until disappearing at the bottom edge.

[Hey there, Cypher,] I thought to him. [Whatcha looking at?]

[I see that you have deigned to remember that I exist.]

[Is that a passive-aggressive way of saying that you missed me?]

[It is impossible for me to miss you, as I am constantly connected to the disorganized mass that is your body. Although, it has grown more organized recently.]

[I feel like people keep telling me things that make no sense.]

[You should try and get used to the sensation. I doubt that the continued increase to your Intelligence score will alleviate the persistent state of obliviousness that you reside within.]

[Jesus Christ, Grotto. What the fuck is up?]

The Delve Core turned and appraised me with its octopus mask. He stared at me for a moment, then cast his eyes down and away, before returning to the screen.

[I am experiencing... sensations that I am unused to. I believe our bond is causing some level of cognitive seepage.]

I felt him probing my mind.

*[I believe you call this emotion... worry? Malaise? Insecurity? Perhaps some other synonym for **weakness**.]*

[You think my feelings are rubbing off on you?]

[It is a theory.]

[Well, I definitely have some insecurities, but I'm not particularly happy that's the main emotion coming through.]

[I have been experiencing minor aberrations in my thought process for the last week. It became something I could no longer ignore once you began your martial training.]

[Ah, I see. I did have a bit of a meltdown for a second. I kind of got overwhelmed by how ridiculous everything is.]

[Ridiculous in what way?]

[I mean, I'm a freaking lawyer, not a soldier. Since I've been in this world everything I've done is either fight something or *prepare* to fight something else. I've got all these Delver abilities, I'm on this "quest" with a bunch of people who have spent a good chunk

of their lives preparing for this sort of thing, and I asked them for pointers. I probably looked less competent than a child to them. I really have no clue what I'm doing, and I'm acting like all of this is normal while I'm wearing armor that's violet with ocean-blue and fuchsia highlights. The imposter syndrome struck hard and fast.]

[We have slain mighty foes and used their own power to fuel our growth.]

[Sure, but I mostly got that done by being overpowered for my level. People underestimate me, and you. Most people don't even know what you are, so how could they be prepared?]

[I have seen many Delvers, and observed much conflict. I have rarely seen a fight that I would consider "fair". Combat is a game of advantages, and there is no shame in using what has been given to you. You should not deny yourself the spoils of victory by becoming concerned with the enemy's own lack of foresight. Their errors are to your advantage. Obsessing over it is a fool's errand.]

[I dunno, it doesn't feel like I've earned what I have. That's one reason I wanted to train with some professionals, but as soon as it started I couldn't help but feel like I was exceptionally out of place. The feeling will pass over time, I'm sure. Assuming I live long enough to let it. But it's something I'm working through. I guess it makes sense that if anything is bleeding over, it's *that* sensation.]

[It is of paramount importance that you endeavor to ameliorate your misgivings as quickly as possible. I loathe experiencing this sensation of imbalance. I am beginning to question my actions, which is absurd.]

[You know, if my emotional state is affecting *you*, does that mean some of what you've got going on might be affecting *me*?]

[I have been evaluating that matter as well. I do not believe the emotional blending is as powerful in your direction. I am the familiar, not you. The normal bonding mechanism provided by the skill may give you stronger influence over me, while my own mental impact has to do with communicating my status or desires. I become more like you cognitively, while you give greater consideration to my needs. It is an efficient way for the System to help ensure a mutually beneficial relationship, especially if the bond had been created with a wild animal, or other creature with sparse intelligence.]

[Well, that's a relief. No offense, but from a human perspective your worldview is kind of skewed.]

[I was not finished.]

[Oh.]

[I have done an analysis of your reactions to a variety of stimuli in the time we have been bonded. While you may not be influenced in as noticeable a fashion as myself, I hypothesize that there is still some level of personality adjustment occurring.]

[I don't like the sound of that.]

[Soon after I became your familiar, you expressed a complex web of emotions over the death of Hognay. You were intellectually convinced of the righteousness of your decision to kill him, but still felt some level of guilt over the violence, especially since it was committed proactively.]

I'd never gotten to the point of expressly stating feeling any guilt over the death of Hognay, but I'd be lying if I said that killing the man hadn't created a tangled mess of conflicting emotions. I'd felt justified, but I hadn't felt good. I'd gotten over it fairly quickly though. Haskagander was pretty garbage-tier as far as people went.

[Whereas I felt no guilt over Hognay's fate, nor would I, had his death been at my own hands. I experience no remorse over any of the lives I have taken in my role as a Delve Core. I experience dissatisfaction when I consider the deaths of Chilla and Sayil, but that has more to do with the circumstances that led me to be Hognay's tool, rather than any regret over the loss of life itself.]

[I'm aware of your antisocial personality disorder.]

[Your reaction was far more subdued when you killed the men and women at Typhoon's warehouse.]

[I wouldn't say that-] I paused in the middle of the thought. I'd barely even considered those people since it happened. They'd attacked *me*, and were involved with a crime-lord who'd tried to organize my kidnapping. Still, were they any more culpable than Hognay? They hadn't murdered anyone that I knew of, though I doubted any of them had clean hands. Still, I only had circumstantial evidence to support that conclusion. I'd done my best to disable them, rather than going for the kill, but several of them *had* died at my hands. Shouldn't I feel... something?

[You think you're rubbing off on me.]

[While I am experiencing the presence of emotions that were previously absent, you may be experiencing the absence of certain emotions that would normally be present.]

[Look, I don't *want* to kill anyone. I care about other people, even people I don't know. If an old lady fell and broke her hip on the sidewalk, I wouldn't just walk past her because helping would be an inconvenience.]

[And I am not about to become paralyzed by self-doubt because I think five potential breeding partners are judging me.]

[Whoa, don't involuntarily turn me into a harem protagonist. That's not where this is going.]

[I am saying that, while the influence is there, we each remain primarily governed by our own principals.]

[Do you think this will get worse?]

[That is what I am endeavoring to find out. I began analyzing your neurochemical reactions during stimulating events, trying to find an analogous process within my own mind, but that was not very helpful. I lack neurochemicals, and what hormones and other secretions are produced by this organic shell to maintain itself do not affect me, as I am a distinct entity piloting the vessel. My mind and body are not mirroring your own during these experiences through physiological means.

[Thus, I turned to your mana matrix and attempted to examine the connection the System established between us when making me your Bonded Familiar. I am attempting to ascertain the nature of the emotional communication traveling via that channel, but have so far failed to find anything helpful. I did, however, discover something of particular interest while studying your mana-veins.]

[You have access to... to all that?] I felt very exposed. [What was it that you found?]

[I believe I know how you are able to improve your stats through training.]