

I started splitting my time between research and physical training, now that I had my mental stats at a good place. After a bit of experimentation, I determined that it took about eight hours of vigorous exercise with a focus on a particular stat to get it to increase by one.

This led to gains that I can only describe as *intoxicating*.

There were no traditional powerlifting gyms in Formation, which made sense because Delvers didn't improve their Strength that way. So, I bought a thousand pounds of iron and was able to fashion it into a basic barbell set with some help from a smith, who thought I was completely daft when I described the project to him. I paid him well, so he was happy to do the work, and a healthy tip elicited promises that he wouldn't develop a pair of loose lips if anyone asked about strange tasks he'd recently taken on. He was very receptive, and I got the vibe that he dealt with that sort of thing fairly often.

The bribe also prompted a new intrinsic skill called *Bribery and Corruption*, which I set aside with the other unselected intrinsics I had available. Not trying to go down that road. Not yet, at least.

I threw myself into a variety of strength-building lifts, channeling my inner broseph, and found that my stamina allowed me to do a full body workout for as long as I wanted without getting winded at all. One muscle group would get tired, but by the time I had done a few sets on another, it was fully rested and ready to go.

I created a loop where I rotated through twenty-five different lifts, three sets each, with as little downtime as I could manage in between. Instead of exhaustion, all that happened was that the work got a little easier every time I rotated back around. After the end of the first day I'd gotten one to strength, and sweated out a couple gallons.

I decided to wait on Agility, since I had a lot less experience or coaching with agility-based techniques or exercises. I wanted to get a trainer for that, so that I didn't pick up any bad habits.

Speed was pretty easy. I ran as fast as I could for as long as I could. Unlike lifting, I couldn't do it forever. Fortunately there was a facility inside the Temple of Creation that allowed for Delvers to test out their stats and get used to the benefits they'd gained, so finding a long track wasn't too hard. The place was open twenty-four hours, so I mixed up my schedule and started running at night when no one else was around. It's one thing to test your speed on a long track, it's another to sprint full-tilt for two hours straight before finally becoming exhausted.

Sprinting, mind you, not running. I could full-out truck ass for two entire hours before stamina became an issue. I didn't even feel it for the first hour, until my stamina finally dipped below fifty percent, and the second hour was the kind of slog I expected from running. Once my stamina was close to empty, I ate, read through some magic theory I'd checked out from the library, and was fully rested in a little over three hours. It took a couple days of this to grab a point in Speed.

Normally, I'm a big fan of breaks. I hated burn out, and was very cognizant of the benefits of rest, but I was obsessed. The way my body moved was beyond anything I could have imagined achieving in my old life, and it completely engrossed me. I fell into a rhythm with the work that was close to manic, pushing my mind and body every waking hour and operating on around six hours of sleep a night. By the end of the second week I'd gotten another four to Strength and two to Speed.

Stats:

Strength 7

Agility 2

Speed 5

Fortitude 22

Intelligence 10

Wisdom 10

Charisma 3

Luck 2

I was looking pretty jacked, and I was feeling good.

The feeling was lost when I found a group of well-armed and armored individuals in my house.

I'd just stepped out from the set of double doors that led to my Pocket Closet. I'd had them custom-installed to match the specific height and width of my Pocket Closet portal. Normally, the doors opened to my impromptu weight room, but when I opened my portal it nestled into the doorway in such a manner that a visitor would think they were walking into another room within the house. I'd mostly requested it for the aesthetic. Who doesn't like a good disappearing room? But I'd also expected it to save me some headaches in the future if I wanted to keep my Pocket Closet on the down-low.

The first person I noticed in my foyer was a handsome, olive-skinned man admiring one of the pieces of art on a wall. He had a scruffy dark beard and medium length black hair, every inch of him looking like a guy who was one-hundred-percent trying to steal your girl. He was probably doing a damn good job of it, too.

He also had a copper soul and the level ten floating above his head.

I was shirtless when I walked out, having finished lifting not too long before, and when I saw the man I casually reached a hand behind me through the portal to summon my vest and boa. They floated into my grasp as I opened the conversation.

"You lost, friend?"

He turned and gave me a practiced smile.

"This is nice," he said, pointing a thumb at the painting. "A bit dark for my taste, though."

It depicted five different versions of the god of death from different religions in Arzia. He was right, it *was* nice.

"I can give you the name of the gallery if you like." I slid on my vest and boa, when a second man walked out of my kitchen.

While the handsome one wore clothes that looked well-tailored, though slightly threadbare, this second man was kitted out in several pieces of steel plate. He was also twice as broad as the first man, and held a two-handed warhammer in one hand, balanced against his shoulder. He had an 'apple' he'd pilfered from my fruit bowl in his other hand, and he bit into it.

"I'm Artemix," said the handsome man, giving me the shallowest of bows. "My colleagues and I have been asked to bring you to meet with a client of ours, so it is my pleasure to extend the invitation."

"Not the most polite way of doing it," I said, eyeing the bigger guy, then noticing a lithe woman sitting on a loveseat to my right. She was in leathers, and a subtle glow played

across her fingers. I suddenly regretted not taking the time to figure out better equipment.

“I apologize for any offense given,” said Artemix. “But the matter is urgent, so it was crucial for us to meet with you as soon as possible.”

“Could have knocked.”

“Not how we normally introduce ourselves.”

“Who’s your client?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Can’t say I’m a fan of that.”

“Alas, your feelings are not terribly important.”

The big guy tossed the half eaten apple to the ground and hefted the hammer into both hands.

“Alright,” I said, “so what’s the procedure here?”

“We take a walk,” said Artemix, shrugging. “Unless you want to make it difficult.”

“I kind of do,” I said.

My mind ran over the half dozen organizations Varrin and Xim had mentioned that might be interested in me. There was no way I was going along with this crew voluntarily. I didn’t *think* my secret was out, but why else would thugs have come calling? It’s not like I’d visited any seedy gambling dens or had outstanding debts with loan-sharks. Then again, maybe that wouldn’t be the worst idea... If they came and broke my kneecaps for not paying, it’d only take me a few hours to regenerate.

I felt the point of a blade on my kidney, refocusing me on my guests, and looked down to see yet another woman crouched next to me. She was tiny, and seemed to appear out of nowhere. A fifth man, thin and tired looking, stepped out from the kitchen behind the big guy.

A full party of copper tens.

“If that’s the case, how about we try this instead?” said Artemix as he waved a hand through the air. A stream of violet light sprung from his fingertips and struck me in the face.

My thoughts immediately started to jumble together. I forgot who these people were and why I was so on edge, and there was a blur of motion as the others in the room sprung to action. My brain caught up with reality and I dove back reflexively into the Closet. Tiny's knife scraped across my side under my vest as I went. It didn't do much damage, but I was hit with a wave of notifications.

You have observed the spell *Confusion*.

Confusion

School: Spiritual

Cost: 10 mana

Cooldown: May only be used once per target per day.

Requirements: Spiritual Magic intrinsic skill

You muddle a creature's thoughts, making it more difficult for them to pay attention or follow what's going on around them. They become easily distracted and fooled, can't maintain focus, and may act erratically.

Your Wisdom is equal to the caster's Charisma. Effect of Confusion has been reduced.

You've been poisoned and afflicted with Paralysis 10.

***Exposure Therapy–Poison* has reduced the effect.**

Reduced effect of Paralysis 10 fails to bypass your resistances.

Paralysis 10 negated!

You gain an additional +1% Toxicity reduction to *Exposure Therapy–Poison*.

[*Why is someone trying to kill you?*] Grotto's voice came from within my mind, lacking any sense of panic or concern.

[I don't know! I think they're trying to catch me, not kill me, though.]

I rolled as soon as I hit the ground inside the Closet and hopped back to my feet. Tiny was nowhere to be seen, but Warhammer was charging in. I was still having trouble focusing. How many enemies were there?

[I do not enjoy the demented sensations I am getting from you. I am going to stabilize your thoughts.]

Remaining effects of *Confusion* have been eliminated by Grotto.

My mind cleared up one second before Warhammer took a swing at me. He was aiming for my leg and I twisted to maneuver away from the weapon, but still caught a glancing blow. The hit to my thigh gave me a serious case of dead-leg and I stumbled back, gritting my teeth at the deep muscle pain. The attack hurt a lot more than the damage numbers indicated.

HP: 347/367

The woman who'd been sitting on the couch with glowing fingers darted in behind Warhammer, and threw a beam of dark brown energy at the ground at my feet. The floor grew muddy and slick, but did little more than make my footing a little unsteady.

You have observed the spell *Quicksand*.

Quicksand

School: Physical

Cost: 10 mana

Cooldown: 1 hour

Requirements: Physical Magic intrinsic skill

You churn the ground into a semi-liquid state, causing anyone treading upon it to be sucked down into a slogging mire. Any creature submerged in the liquified material once the spell ends becomes trapped.

For whatever reason the description of that spell didn't match the effect, and I could see from the woman's look of bewilderment that it had fizzled.

They were using skills and abilities aimed at subduing, rather than killing me, but I felt no particular need to give the same courtesy. Hard to play with kid gloves when you're outnumbered five to one anyway.

I rushed Warhammer, who was lining up another attack. He grinned as I charged.

"Show me what you've got, mage!"

I got inside his reach before he was able to bring his hammer around and I planted a palm on his chest, casting Oblivion Orb. However, rather than the familiar *pop* of the spell and a chunk of my target disappearing, the man's armor glowed bright and lines of arcane energy spiraled through the chestpiece.

"Not good enough!" he said, as his armor absorbed my spell, but his smile quickly faltered as the lines of energy continued to grow brighter. His breastplate sparked, shattered, and fell to the ground in a dozen fractured pieces. He looked down at the broken equipment. "Wait a second..."

I didn't wait a second. I took advantage of the distraction and reached out to plant another Oblivion Orb. A crackling bolt of energy zapped my arm, giving Warhammer time to step back. Artemix was standing just outside of the Closet entrance, wisps of energy trailing off his hand. He looked around the room cautiously, hesitant to enter.

[Grotto! You mentioned traps! You have traps, right?]

[*Of course I do. I've curated a **glorious**, albeit small, collection of lethal devices to harry even the most stalwart of intruders to our Delve.*]

[Then why aren't they doing anything?]

[*Ah, well they aren't set up with any triggers yet, so they need to be deployed manually. I'm waiting.*]

[Waiting for what?!]

[*The right moment. If you're struggling with these incompetents, then I will demonstrate some of my illustrious power to assist you.*]

Grotto floated down from where he'd been hiding in a shadowy corner near the ceiling of the Closet, catching the attention of the intruders. His eyes glowed with sickly green light.

[*Your minds are **weak**.*]

I felt his thoughts reach out beyond the limits of our psychic link, and could practically see the words ripple through the three invaders in my line of sight.

Warhammer screamed, dropping his hammer and clutching the sides of his head, falling to one knee. Glow recoiled, squinting her eyes in concentration against the mental attack, while Artemix's handsome face was marred by a scowl. He stepped into the room and began weaving a new spell, aiming for Grotto.

I tossed a *Dispel* at Artemix, trying out the spell for the first time, and the magic in his hands dissipated into vapor.

A small, ethereal form rushed through the center of the room, the body passing straight through Artemix and Warhammer, coming to a stop directly in front of me. It was the girl Tiny, and a translucent, glowing shortsword appeared from nothing in her hand.

You have observed the spell *Conjure Blade*.

Conjure Blade

School: Mystical

Cost: 5 mana

Cooldown: None

Requirements: Mystical Magic intrinsic skill

You summon a blade made of pure magic, sharper than the finest steel and lighter than the smallest feather. The blade is translucent and difficult to see, and will disappear shortly after leaving your hand.

She swept the blade at me and I caught it with my forearms. It dug into my muscle, sending hot blood streaming down my elbows.

The fifth member of the group, Sleepy, finally showed himself, entering the Closet and holding a hand out to Glow's head. Golden energy poured down it, and Glow straightened, casting off Grotto's influence. I got another spell notification, but I mentally dismissed them all to keep from distracting me.

[Now is the right moment.] Grotto thought.

I realized that all five of my opponents had entered the Closet. A hum filled the air and reality *flexed*.

The intruders paused, wearing expressions of severe discomfort. For me, the feeling was unusual, but familiar. It was similar to when I was about to travel through the dimensional tear created by my Shortcut ability.

A rip formed in the center of the room and a line of dimensional energy pulsed out from its center.

"Dive!" Glow screamed, before hitting the deck. Tiny managed to drop down in reaction to the warning, but Warhammer was still clutching his head, oblivious to anything outside of Grotto's psychic attack. He was on one knee, but it wasn't low enough. The line of dimensional energy tore across the big man's forearms and chest and his cries redoubled as blood began pouring out from the wounds.

Sleepy tried to jump at the last second, but it was a poorly thought out escape. The beam sliced off both of his legs, and he hit the ground hard, blood pumping out from the stumps.

Artemix took the beam straight through the gut, and the man fell to the ground in two. He looked surprised for a moment, staring at his lower body beside him, then went into shock.

The energy passed harmlessly through me, and I darted forward, planting an Oblivion Orb into Warhammer's face. This one went off without a hitch, and the orb had gotten a big boost in size from my improved Intelligence stat. A baseball-sized sphere of the

man's skull disappeared. He immediately collapsed to the ground, fluid pouring out from where his frontal lobe used to be.

Glow screamed and pulled a sword from her belt, then launched off the ground with inhuman force and speed. She ran the sword straight into my chest, and the tip dug deep, though it didn't make it past my ribs. Her eyes went wide at how ineffective the attack was.

"What *are* you?!" she hissed in my face, then twisted the sword deeper into the wound. "You're supposed to be a mage!"

Tiny kipped up and was behind me almost as soon as Glow's sword struck home. I felt her own sword dig into my back, the spectral edge digging deep. The pair leaned into their attacks, their blades piercing further into my muscle.

HP: 263/367

I cast Shortcut and appeared in front of the Closet door, sending Tiny and Glow crashing into one another. I funneled mana into my Oblivion Orb, shaping it like I had against the C'thon.

"I *am* a mage," I said, then let loose the spiraling beam of annihilation. Glow rolled out of the way, her body a blur with speed, but Tiny was still struggling to right herself after my sudden disappearance. She took the beam through the heart, fell to her knees, then collapsed backwards.

I felt an intense pain in my ankle, and looked down to find Sleepy gripping me, golden energy pulsing down his arm. It turned black and necrotic when it reached his hand, and I felt intense cold and heat in my leg, accompanied by incredible pins and needles. I didn't know exactly what his spell was doing, but it felt like my nerves were being slowly eradicated.

Glow hurled herself toward me again.

[*You will **despair.***]

The woman stumbled under Grotto's attack, and I used the opportunity to reach out and grab her by the throat. I let Sleepy pump more death into me as I brought her up to my face, lifting her completely off the ground with one hand. I could soak the damage, and I needed to make a point.

"You're gonna sit the rest of this one out," I growled.

Her eyes were wide and bloodshot, her skin pale. Fresh tears streamed down her face and she nodded. I tossed her away, then kicked Sleepy in the side of the head with full force. It was hard enough to send him sliding away a few feet, and broke the grip he had on my ankle. Whether he were unconscious, or dead, I didn't know. But he wasn't moving anymore, and that was good enough for me.

HP: 219/367

Mana: 37/110

I surveyed the room. Three *definite* corpses, one *potential* corpse, a woman who was balled up in the fetal position having a panic attack, and enough blood to make a Jackson Pollock painting on the ground.

"Well," I said, "not the housewarming party I was expecting."

[*They didn't even bring us a fruit basket.*]