

Arsenal was the quintessential trade hub and traveler's town. The economy revolved around providing services to the merchants, traders, and commuters moving from Hiward's eastern shoreline to Foundation, and most of the south as well. Trade goods passing through Port Sarsora—which serviced ships sailing from The Littan Empire and Eschendur—and bound toward Foundation or Ravvenblaq, found their way to Arsenal where they were purchased, sold, distributed, or transferred to make the rest of their journey.

This made Arsenal a melting pot of races and cultures, both of those native to Hiward and those from the eastern nations. While the majority of the population was still ethnically Hiwardian, with pale skin and white-gray hair, there were a few other flavors of stock-and-trade humans with different skin tones and hair colors. There were also a fair number of the tall, lithe, and fur-covered Littans making a layover in Arsenal on their way to hawk goods in other cities and regions.

There were a few Losons, though not many, and the slightly reptilian individuals steered well clear of the Littans. There were also a small number of men and women who I first thought were wearing headdresses, but later realized they had actual feathers in place of hair. Similar to the Losons, they were mostly(ish) human in appearance, but also sported feathers along their arms and back, along with bright yellow or orange irises like you might see on a bird.

The main street of Arsenal was packed with cramped shops, offering everything from traveling goods to souvenirs, side-by-side with numerous restaurants which were usually the first floor of an inn. Because of the diversity of wealth possessed by the town's patrons, there were considerable choices as to how luxurious a stay one might make in Arsenal. You could find an upscale suite that occupied an entire story, full of posh decor and luxury furniture, or a straw floor just large enough to lie down, with three feet to spare for a random stranger to tuck in beside you. There were also accommodations for every budget found between the aforementioned classes of "rich as shit" and "poor as fuck".

Although our group was a merry band of low-lord nobles with fat Delver pockets, Lito felt it would be imprudent to reserve anything above the level of "kind of nice". While we weren't tasked with a mission of the utmost secrecy and stealth, the fewer eyebrows we raised while moving through Arsenal, the better. Fortunately, Delvers were a common enough sight here. Our weapons and armor didn't turn too many heads. Aside from mine, that is.

After I smiled and waved at the fifth agape gawker on our way to the selected inn, Lito encouraged me to consider a more conservative outfit. I told him that I would take it

under advisement. I could always swap to my boa, vest, and exposed manly chest combination, but I doubted that's what Lito was asking for. Luckily, my closet was replete with a variety of clothing styles that selectively communicated the particular size of coin purse I wanted someone to believe that I carried.

After booking our rooms and getting situated—and my reluctant change into less awesome clothes—most of the crew went down to the attached pub and grabbed dinner and drinks. I joined for the meal, but once the food was tucked away an entire barrel of ale was ordered, and the revels began. I chose to excuse myself at that point and headed back to my room, which is where I'd spent the last ten minutes doing pushups.

Not sets of pushups, but a single, endless set of pushups.

I didn't really like pushups, never had, and I'd given up counting once I passed five-hundred. It was dull, monotonous, and required a lot of attention to my form to keep from getting sloppy.

I also didn't feel like it was doing anything for me.

[Grotto, can you tell if I'm building up any lactic acid in my muscles?]

*[You are not. Not only are your muscles receiving a sufficient supply of oxygen to prevent it, at this point the physiological consequences of exertion within your body are being dampened by your magical nature, which is helping to bear the load. The traditional biological mechanics that are actually still occurring are also being managed and augmented in a similar fashion.]*

[Cool, cool, cool. So I can do pushups indefinitely.]

*[I would agree with that assessment. However, I do not believe this research proves fruitful to our endeavors.]*

[I'm not doing research, I'm trying to get that final point in Strength to bring me up to ten.]

*[Perhaps you would be better served by gripping your hammer while Lito hits you with his rod again.]*

[Phrasing, Grotto. Phrasing.]

*[It seemed effective at the time.]*

[Sure, but Lito is taking a break with everyone else and I don't want to monopolize his free time.]

*[That seems like a self-inflicted limitation with little utility.]*

[People need space sometimes.]

Grotto floated to the ground, bobbing up and down in front of my face in time with my pushups.

*[You just don't want to get hit with the rod again.]*

[It hurt! A lot!]

*[Your endorphin levels were elevated during the experience, so I thought that you enjoyed it.]*

[Not you, too. That joke is getting stale, Grotto.]

*[What joke?]*

I stopped, hopped up to my feet, and squinted at Grotto, trying to decide if he was fucking with me.

[Nothing. Just, never mind. I need a better way to do this.]

*[You could rent a wagon and pull it around town.]*

[Doesn't vibe with Lito's "don't draw too much attention" commandment. Kind of wish I'd loaded up all my weights. This happens every time I travel. I get where I'm going and realize I forgot something.]

*[I do not believe that it is common practice to travel with a thousand pounds of weight-training equipment.]*

[Dwayne Johnson does it, and he doesn't even have several metric tons worth of inventory space.]

Grotto didn't find that comment worth replying to.

*[Why don't you just buy what you need?]*

I considered the suggestion, opened my mouth to respond, then closed it and nodded.

[Yeah, I'm kind of dumb for not thinking of that one.]

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Despite the late-night hours, I was able to find a few merchants who used the benefits of glowstone illumination to ward off the curse of blindness inflicted by the fearsome entity known as dusk, which allowed them to engage in the age-old practice of outcompeting their rivals by forcing underpaid teenagers to forgo sleep in favor of catering to the otherwise untapped market of night-owls like myself.

They also bribed the guards to let them stay open and leave their clientele alone.

So, I bought a two-wheeled horse-drawn wagon, horse not included, and filled it up with fishing boat anchors.

I stuffed it into my Closet training room, removed the wheels, attached some rope, and started doing sled pulls, sled pushes, sled rows, sled presses, sled curls, and so many other sled-related exercises that I became one with my inner Siberian Husky and was overwhelmed with a desire to plow snow and howl at the moon.

I gave up some sleep to get it done, but was finally rewarded with a System message full of unfiltered disappointment at some point between the hours of “why are you up, go to bed” and “fuck it, might as well make breakfast”.

### **Why are you like this?**

**We know your ability says you gain stats through *training*, but do you know how boring you're being? This was supposed to be a filler episode where you find a mutually beneficial solution to your problem by helping out the simple folk of Arsenal with a variety of laborious tasks using your heroic might!**

**They would have been both awed AND amazed at your feats of strength as you hoisted entire barrels full of wine onto an inappropriately high shelf! You could have helped Old Man Tymithy transport the crate of seafood he had to deliver, but was now unable to, because his horse went lame! Now that fish is gonna' spoil. You think Old Man Tymithy can afford *ice*?!**

**Your righteous nature would have been made evident and Arsenal would have been better for your passing! A small, but significant number of world-weary peasants would have had their faith in the generosity of the noble-class restored**

after years of abuse at the hands of laissez-faire policy and the opulent indulgence of the well-to-do!

It was a whole fucking side-quest!

But, no.

You made a sled. And moved it around a bunch.

I'd tell you to go to hell, but you're already a citizen for fuck's sake.

You've earned +1 to Strength!

Wow.

Great, you have a Strength of ten. Congratulations, you earned it by being a gym rat. At least you didn't line the walls of your training room with floor-to-ceiling mirrors...

By reaching a score of ten, you gain the attribute *Leverage*! *Leverage* lets you use your Strength in ways that are normally dumb under the laws of physics. "That guy only weighs 100 kilos! It doesn't matter how *strong* he is, how can he stop the momentum of a moving train?" Magic, that's how.

Also, choose an evolution:

1: *Nimean Weapon*: Your Strength-based attacks are considered magical unless you choose otherwise. Additionally, when you choose this evolution, select one offensive spell you know. You may add the effect of this spell to a Strength-based weapon attack for 1.25x its normal cost, rounded up. This spell originates at the point of impact.

2: *Augean Effort*: Your Strength score is considered doubled when used to alter terrain or structures.

3: *Lernean Teamwork*: Entities damaged by your Strength-based attacks take bonus damage from allies equal to your Strength score.

**Now go fight something! I'm tired of this slice-of-life bullshit.**

[You know, I'm not sure I understand how these abilities work.]

*[Really? You're confused by this? The descriptions are exceedingly straight-forward, to the point where I believe that you should try to agitate the System more often.]*

[No, I get what the abilities are saying, but not how they mesh with what you told me earlier. If my Strength score is based on the development of my mana-veins and matrix, then how can I choose an evolution that doubles the score in relation to certain tasks, the way Augean Effort does?]

*[I see that you have made the mistake of assuming that you are an expert in a field of study after receiving a ten minute lecture on the topic. Did you often antagonize professionals with ill-considered inquiries in your old life, or did you relegate espousing your flawed conclusions to Facebook mom groups dedicated toward vaccine 'research'?)*

[For fuck's sake, Grotto, I just asked a question. Also, if you're going to farm my brain looking for topical references, try and avoid using Facebook. That's old hat. The company is now called *Meta*. Gotta stay relevant, Grotto.]

*[Regardless, there are two primary flaws in your understanding. First, the idea that magically-based systems follow an organized logic that is wholly trackable and predictable. I believe Seinnador already attempted to disabuse you of this notion, but I see that the guidance did not take.*

*[Second, mana may act in more potent ways when gathered in sufficient density and structured so as to invoke specific restrictions. Here, the ability only applies toward terrain and structures, providing the magic with a guided channel.]*

[You could have just said that last bit. The rest was unnecessary.]

*[No. The rest was required to ensure your continued development along an appropriately curated path of competency. We cannot rule creation if you are an ill-informed dullard.]*

[You've gotten mean lately.]

*[My words are given with no malice. If you do not appreciate the honesty then you may refrain from seeking my guidance.]*

[You'd just give it to me anyway.]

There was a moment of mental silence, where I imagined Grotto was wagging his tentacles within the Pocket Delve.

[Yes, you are right. I would.]

[Well, good time to remind myself that there *is* a mute button for this relationship.]

*Nimean Weapon* was cool. If I took it, every mundane melee weapon in my inventory would become capable of bypassing the basic level of resistance granted by Fortitude. I also wouldn't need to add any basic damage weaves to my items, but the ability didn't passively improve damage. It gave the option of adding a spell to my attack, which gave me a few ideas.

The first and most obvious one was picking *Oblivion Orb* and adding it to a two-handed weapon to put a little range on the spell without dumping half my mana bar into mana-shaping it. It would still tick up the cost from five to seven (damn you upward rounding, it should only cost six-point-two-five, where does the other point-seven-five go?!), but that was still a lot cheaper than the ranged edition of the spell I'd used on the c'thon.

Sure, it couldn't hit a target from across the room, BUT, what counted as a *Strength* attack? What if I threw something really, really hard? Would that still work?

*Augean Effort* looked very enticing. The word "alter" could mean a lot of things. Also, having my Strength score doubled likely did a lot more than just doubling how strong I was. My *Oblivion Orb* did a lot more than double in volume going from a four to a ten in Intelligence, and the amount of weight I could add to my max lifts for each point of Strength gained steadily rose while I was weight training.

Stats were, at least in some ways, geometric. Going from a twenty Strength to a forty may be more like a five times multiplier to the force I could apply, rather than a measly doubling. Going from a forty to an eighty? Yee-haw.

I salivated over the thought of busting through walls while yelling "Oh yeeeeaaaah!" like the motherfucking Kool-Aid man. I was already rehearsing my inflection for when I inevitably plowed through a door screaming "I'm the Juggernaut, bitch!"

It would also be good for creating traps, constructing defensive fortifications, building all sorts of other wacky shit, and landscaping.

*Lernean Teamwork* was the obvious choice for a consistent boost to party damage. I already gave one buff to my team from *Who Needs a Cleric?* This would stack a damage modifier on top.

However, I wasn't planning on mainlining Strength attacks. It was helpful for now because of my training stats, but the one thing I knew for certain was that I planned on using spells for a lot of my fighting. A plan that had, thus far, not been executed as well as it could have. I really needed more mana.

Also, *Lernean Teamwork* was boring. What catchphrase would I use for that ability? "There's no "I" in team, so get wrecked, scrub!"? That didn't even make sense. "Power of Friendship attack!"? Boo. "Teamwork makes the dream work and our dream is that you fucking die!"? Too long. I could just hold up my hammer and demand that we assemble, but that was pretty unoriginal.

I selected *Nimean Weapon* comboed with *Oblivion Orb*, because I wanted to hit things with a reality-erasing hammer. That sounded swell.

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The following morning our group gathered at the Eastern gate of Arsenal, which guarded a bridge we'd use to cross a river flowing into Lake Hollow before heading south toward Ravvenblaq.

There were a few hangovers, though none of them particularly severe due to Delver resilience, and a quick couple of cleanses and heals from Xim took care of the rest.

I wondered if her ability created electrolytes. Water as well. Cole had said it could help with blood loss, so I suppose it made sense that it could create *anything* the body needed to some extent.

Just, not entire stretches of intestine. At least, not yet.

The run toward the mountains was exactly as entertaining as you'd think it would be.

There were shitty roads, random travelers who watched us with interest as we zipped past, wide and fertile plains, farmland, cattle, horses, a butterfly that was fucking on fire and burned like hell when you got too close, and all the variety afforded by rural pasture and grassland.



Those of us with the lowest Fortitude were able to all-out sprint for about an hour and a half, after which we would trade down to a jog while our stamina recovered. A couple hours into the jogging portion my stamina was back to full, but Xim and Ember were still regenerating.

I asked Lito to call us to a stop, and floated the idea of anyone with Fortitude below twenty hanging out in my Pocket Closet. The impossibility of the math was not lost on Ember or Lito, who pointed out my personal incapability to possess a Fort that high at level one, but I hand-waved it away by telling them I had abilities and achievements that gave me more stamina than I should have otherwise. True enough, and they let it slide, though I suspected Lito would have more questions for me some time soon.

Still, I'd made the mistake of pretending I was weaker than I was back in the Creation Delve, and people had died. Would being honest have made a difference? I still didn't know, but I didn't want to have any regrets over ignoring my strengths in favor of subtlety.

Plus, my citizenship with the Third Layer made me a tougher target to annoy with coercive inquiries. I was, politically, much safer than I had been in the past.

So, Xim, Ember, Cole, and Myria joined Nuralie in the Closet, while Lito, Ashe, and I continued sprinting south toward the Ravvenblaq mountains.

I was kind of jealous. Especially when Myria broke out a skin of fruit tea and little cakes before heading into the Closet, to be enjoyed by those inside.

Beyond helping us get to Ravvenblaq faster, there was also a more selfish reason for presenting this plan. I needed to sprint to train my Speed, and now I could do so with abandon.

Three more hours sprinting, a one hour jog to recover, and another hour at speed brought us to the southern edge of the mountain pass. Overall, we'd gotten there quite a bit faster than Lito had expected, since we weren't slowed by our less hearty members. I was also rewarded with the delectable **+1 SPD** notification, which brought me up to seven. I wouldn't make ten before the cave, but I'd already made more progress on the trip than I thought I would have.

The three of us turned west, moving along the southern edge of the mountain range, and made it to our meet-up point a day early. South of the mountains featured several stretches of woodlands, and we set up camp a couple kilometers deep into the forest.

The night was filled with a thick sense of tense anticipation as we prepared ourselves for what we might face on the 'morrow.