

Eventually the Alpha was subdued, and Ember dismissed her mega-owl to keep it from eating the body parts the beastman needed to respond to questions. Myria managed to lock him down with her mind-magic, but she was unable to encourage the man toward providing any useful information. Since the Alpha wasn't responsive to Myria's good-cop routine, Lito called in the big guns to serve as the bad cop.

A familiar level ninety Delver arrived atop a mighty alabaster hand, and took custody of the Alpha. Despite Lito's protests, the blue-haired woman flew off with her prisoner in tow, her only response to complain loudly that "paperwork isn't why I signed up to work for Central!", and "if everything's an emergency, then nothing's an emergency!"

Cole and Xim had been kept busy trying to stabilize Quickwind during the battle. His condition had taken a nosedive with the arrival of the Alpha. The brawny beastman possessed some sort of tribal magic that caused the bodies of Chovali near him to react in different ways. For his minions, it apparently made them a *bit* bolder than they'd normally be. For Quickwind, it aggravated his wounds and forced him into shock. A boon for his allies and a bane for his enemies. It might have been worth it to try and study the effect with my aura, but by the time the thought crossed my mind the Alpha was already gone.

I also received a new notification after the fight.

Yer a wizard, Arlo! Keep growing out that beard, because all spellslingers know that it's the one true path to thaumaturgical power. You've not only acquired intrinsic skills for all three magical schools available to you, you've also slotted and cast at least one spell from each. Because of your profound focus on annihilating foes through arcane means, you are offered the *Archmage* passive skill.

***Archmage:* You no longer suffer any penalty for casting spells from magic schools adjacent to your attunement. Mystical and Physical spells will now operate at 100% efficiency.**

+25% Maximum Mana

+25% Mana Regeneration

Oh yeah, that hits the spot. I took it immediately.

Passive Skills: 3/4

Archmage: Level 1

You no longer suffer any penalty for casting spells from magic schools adjacent to your attunement. Mystical and Physical spells will now operate at 100% efficiency.

+25.75% Maximum Mana (+0.75% per level of *Archmage*)

+25.75% Mana Regeneration (+0.75% per level of *Archmage*)

Bonded Familiar: Level 5

You acquire a bonded familiar. Effects vary based on the familiar. Each level grants your familiar a +1% stat bonus.

Who Needs a Cleric? (Aura): Level 8

You and your allies gain an additional amount of Health regeneration equal to your Fortitude up to a maximum of (32). Each level beyond the first provides +10% Aura Range and increases Maximum base effect by 1. (+70% range, +7 max base effect)

I only had one passive slot left, but I couldn't imagine a better passive for my build. *Archmage* gave me resources and a little boost to damage for Physical and Mystical spells, which normally operated at eighty percent of their potency, since they weren't my primary attunement, Dimensional. *Bonded Familiar* gave me a lot of utility with Grotto, who could also debuff enemies with his mental attacks and regulate my body in emergency situations, and *Who Needs a Cleric?* was raw health regen for myself and my party.

All I needed was either a purely defensive passive for classic tankiness, or one that helped me kick a little more booty. Maybe one that did both if I was being greedy.

I checked out my adjusted mana and regen.

Mana: 97/138

Mana Regeneration: 25/hour (Base Effect) 34/hour (Actual, +9 Dimensional Absorption)

Either the System rounded off the decimals, or the text didn't bother to get that granular. I could probably change the display to show the detail, but I didn't think it was necessary.

When we arrived at the Chovali colony, the scene was grim. Quickwind was able to move around the settlement with the help of Xim, but there were very few of the adults left alive. Some of the women had been spared, and a few of the elderly, but most of the Chovali who'd been able to fight were gone. It was possible that they'd been scattered and would return, like Quickwind, but dried and tacky bloodstains spoke of a more tragic conclusion.

All of the children, however, were safe and well cared for.

We also found a dozen Hiwardian crewmen from three different vessels that would shortly be reported as missing. From what we gathered, the Alpha and his troupe sank several more as well, but other captains were less inclined to submit themselves to capture. The beastman leader failed to elucidate his reasoning for the attacks to any of the prisoners, and the surviving Chovali had little insight to provide either.

"All of the vessels we've been told about were destined for Arsenal, like ourselves," Lito said after we'd spoken with the captives. "Which is either a coincidence, or means they have some sort of access to shipping records, and were targeting trade to the city for some reason."

"Customs," said Myria, "or legwork."

"Well, we know there aren't any Chovali skulking about in Foundation writing down the names and cargo of ships on the river," said Lito. "They likely have a non-Chovali spy in the capital." He heaved a sigh and rubbed at his eyes. It was pushing toward the

witching hour, and we still planned to disembark in the morning. Fortunately, none of us would be hoisting any anchors or manning any sails bright and early the next day. Still, something told me Lito wasn't the type to sleep in.

"With Umi-Doo carting off all our leads," said Lito, "there's not much I can do with this info. Pass it along through the slate, Myria. Then let's get some sleep."

"Hammerheads are Littan war-birds," said Nuralie before Lito could start making his way back toward the Closet.

"That's true," said Lito. "Not enough to assume Littan involvement, though."

"Arsenal is the main trade hub between Foundation and Port Sarsora," she said.

"That's still weak evidence."

"I'm not sure I follow," I said.

"Port Sarsora is the main port between Hiward and the eastern nations. Nations such as Litta *and* Eschendur."

"You suspect it might have something to do with the blockade?" I said, looking at Nuralie.

"Yes."

"I don't see that making sense," said Lito. "If the Littans go scorched earth on supplies heading toward Sarsora, then their own trade would be disrupted. Plus, why would they risk the equivalent of military action on Hiwardian soil when they can just blockade the goods in the first place?"

"Technically," said Myria, "they can't completely blockade the goods. After you mentioned my mushrooms getting cut off I looked into it. Hiward demanded concessions and Litta pledged to buy goods bound for Eschendur. Then they *must* resell it to Eschendur, after they've 'inspected' it. Goods coming out of Eschendur get the same treatment."

"The fuck is the point of that?" said Lito.

"Economic attrition," I said. "They mark up the goods from Hiward to sell to Eschendur, and then pay silvers on the gold for the goods bound for Hiward."

“That’s actually right,” said Myria raising her eyebrows at me. “Eschendur gets hustled both ways. Buying things costs more, selling things nets less. All without completely pissing off the sleeping bear.”

“And the sleeping bear’d be us,” said Lito. “I think I see now. If the Littans wanted to engineer a goods shortage without running afoul of the agreement, they might go after the ships in a more clandestine manner.”

“So they hired Beta-Bat for the job?” I said. I’d mentally downgraded the beastman from Alpha since he wasn’t Chad enough to stand up to Ashe, Ember, and Myria. “Why do that?”

“Maybe they wanted us to fight with the Chovali,” said Myria. “They have colonies at all the major river mouths with cliffs like this one. If Hiward went on a crusade against the Chovali, it’d be a nice distraction for Litta if they were up to something.”

“Sure,” I said, “but even if that’s the case, why give them a Littan war bird? Might as well hand the Beta-Brood a Littan flag, right?”

“True,” said Lito, appraising Nuralie for a moment. “It almost looks like someone *wants* us to think it’s Litta.”

“You think *my* people-” Nuralie began, anger marring her features for the first time since I’d known her. Lito held up a hand to stop her.

“No, no,” he said. “That’s not what I meant. Whoever it is, I doubt Eschendur would be involved. Sabotaging your own supplies is a poor way to drum up support from Hiward.”

“And ass-backwards,” said Myria. “What a round-about way of doing things that would be.”

“Regardless, all of this is pure speculation,” said Lito. “For now, we report what we’ve learned, and get on with our job. Let Umi-Doo make the immediate connections.”

Nuralie didn’t look satisfied, but she nodded and turned toward the boat’s hatch. Her tail swung from side to side in agitation as she left.

One of the best things about high Fortitude is that missing a few hours of sleep doesn't mean shit.

I hadn't tested the limits of my endurance yet, but risin' and shinin' after four hours of kip with the only consequence being a ten point penalty to my max stamina for the day felt like a pretty good trade, if you ask me. Especially when I had 200+ of the suckers and no good way to spend them.

Although, that was something I really needed to fix. I had a huge resource pool that I didn't know how to use, aside from sprinting endlessly for Speed training. Not a bad way to use my stam, but being down to ten percent HP with ninety percent of my stamina left felt suboptimal, and that's exactly what'd happened in the Creation Delve.

I had, thusly, made it my day's goal to do something about it.

I approached Lito above deck, where he was reviewing a small stack of papers transcribed from communications received from Myria's slate this morning, a cigarette smoldering between his fingers. I was curious about what sort of things Umi-Doo and the mystery blue-haired woman had learned from the Beta-Bro, but I had a mission. I stayed on task and ignored the urge to narcissistically seek out all relevant information concerning the events going on around me.

"Lito sensei," I said, giving the man a Japanese-style bow, rather than a Hiwardian one with my palms pressed together. "I humbly request that you teach me the way of the hammer."

The Guardian looked momentarily taken aback, but quickly regained his normally stoic appearance. He flicked his smoke off into the lake and stuffed the papers into his inventory.

"Sure," he said. He was already walking toward the hatch.

Lito looked around my training room with a critical eye. He ran his hand along the shafts of several of the floating weapons, then kicked his heel at the floor.

Somehow, all of the wood, splinters, and debris from the barrels and crates Xim and I had trashed the day earlier were gone. Either someone did a little sneaky cleaning, or the detritus decided to excuse itself. Either way, the floor was spotless.

“Pretty sparse,” he said. “But it works. What’s the floor made of?”

“Some kind of metal, I think.” I appraised the strange material. “Actually, I have no idea.”

He grunted.

“Alright, show me what you can do.”

“Right,” I said, shaking off some nerves. I’d had a single day of embarrassing practice, but that was alright. Only way to get better was to just go and do the thing. Even if Lito thought I was beneath his ability to instruct, I would just find someone else.

Yeah. No worries. Just do it.

I pulled the steel hammer down from the wall and took a stance.

I went through the few practice motions that I’d been shown. Quick strikes, followups, backswings. I moved to hold the hammer with the spike facing forward, moving through attacks intended to pierce helmets and joints on armored opponents. Several of the swings moved into one another, and a few felt more like physical exercises than anything meant to kill someone.

“You’re starting from an odd place,” said Lito, who prowled around me as I moved.

“What do you know about the history of warhammer use?”

“Uh, nothing, I guess.”

He nodded, looking like he’d expected that answer.

“The most commonly used weapons in traditional warfare, historically, have been axes and spears. Swords are used often enough, but generally carried as sidearms by knights and wealthy veterans. Not widely used among infantry.

“Axes are popular because every peasant knows how to swing an ax. They use it for chopping and shaping wood, butchering and skinning game, and as a stand-in for a host of other tools they might lack. Doesn’t take much training for a peasant to use a waraxe, and the weapons are effective against infantry.

“Spears have a lot of reach, so they give an inherent benefit to the wielder against an enemy using a one-handed weapon. Longspears are particularly effective against

cavalry charges. Both of these uses benefit from unit tactics, and the tactics are pretty simple. Hold a defensive line and poke the enemy. Again, doesn't take much to train a new recruit. Axes and spears are both cheap to produce.

"Swords are more expensive to make, both in materials and the ability of the blacksmith, and also have a high skill threshold. Swords take money and training. A well-trained swordsman wielding a well-made sword is a nightmare for unarmored opponents in a small skirmish, but on a larger battlefield those advantages tend to be lost in the face of numbers and, more importantly, armor.

"A knight in full-plate armor is mostly immune to mundane attacks made by one-handed weapons, especially swords. Swords don't have a lot of weight, and their utility is best for cutting and piercing flesh. Take a one-handed sword to an armored opponent, it'll bounce right off. There are some techniques with a two-handed sword that overcome that limitation, but it's not ideal. Axes are a little better, since there's some heft to them and the weapon's designed to split shit anyways. Spears work if an armored opponent is charging you, but less useful if you're both on foot.

"Maces, including warhammers, became popular once knights in heavy armor were common on the field. An infantryman might not rely on it as their mainstay, but would likely have some sort of bludgeoning weapon as a backup. The skill required to make basic use of a mace is not very high, but there is also a good amount of benefit gained from training and technique.

"The reason for maces being so effective is that the force of a blunt impact travels *through* armor, even without piercing it. Any man learning to wield a shield can tell you how much it hurts to take a hit without properly deflecting the attack. The kinetic energy travels into your body, and can still manage to break bones, despite those bones being protected by metal.

"Many knights have now taken to equipping some sort of mace as a primary or secondary weapon. After all, hitting a man with a wad of steel will still kill or disable them *without* armor, and if the enemy is a fellow knight in full plate, well now you also have a weapon that'll hurt them pretty well, too. Longer maces can also be used on horseback, since hitting a man with a hunk of metal at speed will doubly ruin their day, regardless of what kind of armor hugs their ass."

"So why do so many Delvers use swords as a main weapon?" I asked.

"*Delvers* use swords for three main reasons. First, they can afford to buy the weapon and the training required. Second, most Delvers are concerned with fighting monsters, not people, and most monsters are soft targets. There are a variety of beasts with

natural armor, but they're a lot less common than the squishy ones. Third, Delvers have access to stats and magic. It doesn't matter much *what* I'm hitting someone with if I have a Strength of forty. Even if I used a broken chair leg, most mundane knights would be crushed. So, a sword wielded by a high-Strength Delver cuts through steel as though it were the belly of a newborn pig, even without weaves. Add weaves into the mix, now the knight may as well be wearing the air as armor.

"There are a number of other advantages to blades—precision, speed, blood loss, difficulty healing the types of wounds inflicted—but those are lessons for later. We're talking about maces. Specifically, hammers.

"Hammers have the same advantages as more traditional ball-type maces, but require a little more finesse. You need to hit the enemy with the head of the hammer to maximize damage. With a ball-mace, you just have to hit them at all, since the end is uniform on all sides. What the hammer gains for this trade-off is increased utility, and lower weight for greater speed and control.

"The front of a hammer concentrates power into a small point of impact, increasing the force per square centimeter against a target. This increases the kinetic energy applied to a specific area, and also increases the chance of warping or crushing armor, which can debilitate an armored opponent, even if the strike doesn't cause any internal harm."

I thought about Varrin being stuck in his twisted cuirass back in the Creation Delve. He could barely breathe, let alone fight.

"The opposite side from the head of a hammer is the spike, usually curved slightly, which can be used to pierce through targets and also grapple them. This can penetrate an opponent's helmet and brain. It can crack through joints and disable. It can be used to hook and pull targets off balance, and also disarm. The one you have there also has a spike at the tip for lunging and piercing, though that's not a universal feature. Gives a bit of reach and another vector for punching through armor. Also bad news when someone takes that to the gut."

I nodded as he spoke, absorbing the information. I began to ask a question, but he continued.

"Now, since the main utility of hammers is hitting armored targets, why would *Delvers* use them, when monsters and beasts have soft hides ready for slashing, and which are slightly more resilient against bashing? It's simple, really. One, hammers get the same benefits from stats as swords, so having a high Strength will make most targets die just as quick from a hammer to the gut as a blade. Blades still have the advantage of

exsanguination and causing easy disability by shearing tendons and muscles, but by and large it's a subtle difference that only shows in the toughest fights.

“But, the most important reason is that Delves *don't* always fight monsters. We fight each other as well.”