

“Your Blunt skill is too low,” said Khigra. “It wouldn’t be worth my time to make a hammer for you.”

We stood before a rack of weapons the dream forger had made, each with requirements more substantial than the last.

“Makes sense,” I said. “You wouldn’t hire Michaelangelo to paint your house.”

I brought up the item description for a sword that floated in the air, its edges fading in and out of being. Varrin *might* have been able to use that one, but only because his Sword Prodigy passive lowered the required stats for any sword he held.

Khigra walked over to me and gripped my shoulder then went lower and squeezed my upper arm. Her grip was *very* firm.

“What’s your Strength score?” she asked.

“Ten.”

She crossed her arms, then leaned against a post.

“Why do you want to wield a hammer?”

“Would you object to the answer ‘because hammers are cool’?”

She gave me another mildly entertained look.

“No,” she said. “I enjoy all the weapons I make. It’s why I do this.” She gestured around the shop.

“It’s good to like what you do. How high would my Blunt skill need to be?”

She looked up at the tarp above us, pursing her lips in thought.

“I have some ideas for using Intelligence as the main stat,” she said. “Fortitude would be better, but I don’t think it fits with the way you want to use it. In a perfect world, your Blunt skill would be equal.”

“Twenty-one,” I said. “That means I’d need to go up another nine levels.” She nodded. I dismissed the item screen for the sword I was inspecting. “Well, I guess I’ll come back in a couple of months.”

Her eyebrows went up.

“Just like that?” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I tell you I won’t make it and you’re willing to walk away?”

“I mean, I’ll come back. Training is always at the top of my List, so it’s not like you’re asking me to do anything I wouldn’t already be doing.”

“Patriarch Drel’gethed commissioned me himself,” she said. “He told me to make you whatever you asked for.”

“And that was very generous of him. What, uh, what’s your point?”

She popped off the post and looked me up and down.

“You could *insist* that I do it,” she said. “Right now, even with your low skill level.”

“Seems like a waste,” I said. “Besides, forcing someone to work against their wishes is a bit dumb for a couple of reasons. One, asshole move. Two, and not to doubt your integrity, but what if they did a shit job out of spite?”

She nodded and looked thoughtful.

“Anyway, It was nice meeting you,” I said. “I’ll come ba-”

“Do you have a trainer?”

“No. Xim’s Blunt is more than double mine, so I thought-”

Khigra waved a hand dismissively.

“Sparring with a party member is fine for sharpening skills,” she said. “It’s no good for building fundamentals.”

“Do you... have someone in mind?”

She looked me over again, drumming her fingers along a biceps.

“I’ll train you,” she said.

“Really?” I said, confused. “I won’t assume how long it takes you to make a hammer but if you’re worried about wasting time, training me up nine levels will take weeks, at the least.”

She smiled again. This time it was a little feral.

“I would learn nothing from making a *bad* hammer,” she said. “There is always something to be learned from training.”

Three months.

Khigra kicked my ass for three. Months.

Best three months of my life.

Getting my Blunt to 21 took a little less than five weeks. After that, we worked on Heavy Armor and Shields. She took a little *too* much pleasure in walloping me around the yard outside her forge with a different melee weapon every day.

The woman had the Weapons Master passive, which meant she could wield almost anything effectively. One day she just had a big fuck-off branch, practically a log. That's the only time I've ever had the same skill go up twice in one day, which is roughly a quarter of the number of times my arm was broken from blocking the hunk of wood.

Khigra was a different kind of trainer than Varrin. Where the swordsman was meticulous, intentional, and grueling, Khigra was enthusiastic, taunting, and above all else, *fun*. Even though I was no match for her she was always eager for our daily duels and she was as excited to play the part of 'master' as I was to play the part of 'student'.

There was a rhythm to our physicality with one another that was harmonic and augmentative. She learned my thoughtful and, as she was quick to point out, overly analytic style and broke it down with animal grace. By the end of it, I was fighting on instinct and emotion as much as on higher reasoning and our fights were closer to a choreographed dance, rather than the clunky melee they had started as.

The results of our efforts took my Blunt to 21, my Shields to 20, and my Heavy Armor to 11. A total gain of 24 intrinsic skill levels, which was more than most Delvers got done in a year.

At the end of the twelfth week, after my Shields skill finally hit 20, we paused our training session early. The day had seen me on my ass as much as my feet, which was a big step up compared to the previous fortnight. I was sore, exhausted, down to two-thirds HP, and about as sweaty as I'd ever been.

“Shit,” I said between heavy breaths. “I’ve never been so disappointed in a skill-up before. I mean, I knew I had to go back to the First at some point, but it always seemed kind of... far off.”

Khigra sent her broadsword to her inventory and closed the distance between us with an easy pace. She stopped about a foot away.

“So, what now?” I asked. “Start working on my hammer?”

She reached up and wiped a bit of sweat and dirt from my brow, then let her hand drift down the side of my face and neck to my collarbone. Our practice had destroyed no less than six different shirts, so I’d taken to going without when we weren’t focused on armor training. She ran her thumb along the ridge of bone, then looked up at me with an expression I can only describe as sultry.

“Now,” she said, “we practice grappling techniques.”

Did you know that the furniture in the Third Layer could be reinforced with the very concept of resilience?

It was convenient since Delvers needed sturdy beds.

While I was... training... Xim was working on her Divine with Drel and, to my surprise, Grotto. The core was Divine-attuned so it was no surprise that he knew a thing or two about the school of magic but his engagement with the party had gone up tenfold since our talk with Sam’lia. He’d transformed from a veritable hikikomori to a wise, insistent sage overnight.

At the end of our three months in the Third Layer, on the final night of our stay, Khigra prepared to forge a new weapon for both myself and Xim.

The process included a hundred members of the tribe in addition to Khigra and ourselves. Dream forging didn’t involve melting metal or hammering out impurities. It was a guided manifestation of intent, directed by Khigra and imbued with the will of many of the tribe’s most skilled dreamers. We all gathered in the open field around Khigra’s workshop, which existed for that very purpose, not just as a stomping ground for my ass.

Xim went first. As Khigra summoned the form of the cleric's new scepter, the forge master connected Xim's desire to the crowd and guided us as we focused on the concepts of Judgment and Flame. The air shimmered and the world *flexed* as the weapon was forged. The look on Xim's face when she stepped forward to take the scepter in her hands was one of absolute glee. She gave it a couple of practice swings but resisted the urge to start knocking down houses. She pulled Khigra into a tight hug, then returned to the crowd as I stepped up next to Dream Forger to receive my own tribal gift.

"It's a shame that I won't be able to instruct you with this new weapon," said Khigra with a smirk.

"Oh," I said, "I'll be back. I'm going to set up a Checkpoint in the tree."

"Checkpoint?"

"My Dimensional 20 evolution lets me create permanent connections to my Pocket Closet. I can only make two and the portals only last an hour once a day, but that'll let me travel to and from the tribe without much trouble."

"Is that so?" she said. "I guess we all beseech the Eye in our own way."

Her comment made me consider whether creating a Checkpoint really *was* beseeching the Eye. Sam'lia was the ultimate gatekeeper of travel to and from the Third Layer, and one needed to ask the Eye's permission to gain entry. If my Checkpoint skill worked, that meant that it must work with her blessing.

Khigra leaned in close and whispered in my ear. "I look forward to many more lessons." She moved back again. "Now," she said at normal volume, "since you can Reveal, this process will be easier for you than most."

"Right. The connection you made when forging for Xim felt a lot like the way I touch on souls while using the revelation."

She nodded.

"Go ahead and reach out with Reveal. The tribe members here will be open and accepting."

I readied myself, then used the Reveal ability for the first time in months. The skill allowed me to share my perception with others around me and it went much deeper than the surface-level experience of my five senses. Reveal showed those with whom I connected the world colored by my thoughts, intuitions, and feelings. For some, it was

overwhelming, making it difficult to tell where I began and where they ended. It had caused a small amount of chaos in my party's fight with the specter of Orexis for that very reason.

The souls of the hundred tribe members were beacons in the night. Beholding them with Reveal engulfed me in a cacophony of presence, similar to my Soul-Sight when viewing a powerful individual, but suffusing the entirety of my perception. I felt, heard, and tasted the tribe surrounding me, awash in their emotions. I corraled the feeling and began directing it to the concepts I wanted to embody, guided by Khigra's expert hand.

Dream forging worked best in sets of two or three concepts. After having discussed it with Khigra, I'd settled on two.

Growth and Void.

In my mind, the ideas were integral to one another. Growth was my lifelong pursuit. Ever-forward, ever-improving. Every day I wanted—*needed*—to be better than I was the day before. Stagnation was a terror nipping at my heels. It wasn't always helpful or useful, but it was a part of my identity. I could use it and shape it into something that served me, but I also had to take care that *I* ruled the concept and that the concept did not rule *me*.

The void was absence, the lack of, space waiting to be filled. It was what I grew *into*. When I'd arrived in Arzia, I'd had nothing. No possessions, no family or friends, no connections. I'd had my body and the gifts given to me by Fortune, as potent as they were, but so far as this world knew, where there was once empty air, a person appeared. I filled my world with new relationships and my presence expanded out into Arzia as I lived. As my Closet expanded outward and endless, filling the dimensional nothing in which it existed, I too would grow without end, ceaselessly through the void.

I delivered these concepts to the tribe, their will imbued Khigra's workings and where there was naught, *Somnrcres* came into being. I reached out to take the weapon and then inspected it.

**Somnrcres**

**War Hammer**

**This is an evolving item.**

**Requirements**

**STR 10, INT 21, Blunt 21, Dimensional Magic 20, Mystical Magic 10**

**Effects:**

- 1) Somnrcres can be summoned and dismissed at will.**
- 2) Somnrcres's size and form can be adjusted at will, so long as you would normally be able to wield such a hammer.**
- 3) Whenever you make a thrown weapon attack with Somnrcres you may create up to X copies, where X is your INT/10. Each copy costs 2 mana to create. These copies possess all qualities imbued into Somnrcres at the moment the copies are created.**
- 4) Khigra may imbue this item with an additional effect once you reach your next Intelligence evolution.**

The haft and handle of Somnrcres were black and the head was emerald green. All along the length of the weapon were points of light that shifted and moved as I turned the hammer, evoking a sense of cosmic space like both Drel's body and my own irises. All in, it was pretty damn cool and I couldn't wait to throw it at a motherfucker.

"Growth was a good choice," said Khigra, looking over the item with me. "It is less powerful than the weapons I normally make, but it may be worth boasting about one day."

"Thank you," I said, holding the hammer reverently. Khigra gave me a gentle pinch on the ribs.

"It's not a baby," she said. "Stop cradling it like one."

"Right," I said. "That tickles, you know."

"Would you rather it hurt?"

"Both are good."

She smiled and squeezed my shoulder, then I took a few steps away from everyone and gave Somnrcres a couple of practice swings. It was a little over three feet in length in its current form. I focused and the weapon grew until it was comfortable to hold in two hands. I went through a few practice motions, then willed the hammer down to a form that mimicked my throwing hammers. I wasn't about to go tossing it around with

everyone milling about, so I looked it over and gave it a flip. The weight and balance were perfect for me in each form it took. I turned to the tribe members who were gathered and gave a bow.

“Thank you all for this greeting,” I said. “It is my honor to be a part of the Xor’Drel tribe.”

“Thank us at the tavern!” someone yelled, which got a few chuckles.

The group broke up and several members approached to give me their well wishes. Afterward, the casks of ale were opened and the spirits flowed. Xim and Drel eventually wore me down and convinced me to try some of the fabled liquor brewed from the sap of the Irgriana tree.

Unlike normal First Layer denizens, I did *not* go into a coma. Instead, I got to take my hammer for its first test drive fighting the hallucination demons that I accidentally spawned. I’m pretty sure the others were helping the manifestation along, as I doubted I had learned enough about manipulating the fabric of the Third Layer to summon Grade Two monsters without assistance.

The evening passed, I set my Checkpoint within the Irgriana tree and then spent the night with Khigra. The next morning Xim and I said our farewells to the tribe and returned to the First Layer, setting out for Ravvenblaq.

When we arrived, Varrin was cutting down training dummies with a sword that was as long as a giraffe was tall, from hoof to head. It was also so thin that there was no way physics was letting that thing exist without a whole lot of magic devilry going on.

“That’s a big fucking sword!” I yelled from a good, safe distance. I wasn’t willing to get within a hundred feet of the man while he held the thing. Varrin paused and turned to see us, then the sword collapsed down on itself until it was the length of a normal longsword.

“We’ve got a lot to discuss,” he said as he made his way toward us.

“Yep!” said Xim, trotting forward and peering over the sword. “Arlo got laid.”

Varrin raised an eyebrow and looked at me.

“Good for him,” he said. “But that’s not what I meant.”

“Have *you* gotten laid recently?” Xim asked. Varrin opened his mouth to reply but snapped it shut without answering. Xim patted him on the arm. “Don’t worry, me either.”

“Not for the lack of trying by your parents,” I said, and she scowled.



“Why are we talking about sex?” said Varrin. “Let’s not.”

“Ok,” said Xim. “We can move on to Arlo’s new mystery technique. *Sam’lia* taught it to him herself.”

“She didn’t really teach it to me,” I said. “More like she *guided* me to it. It’s called *Gravity Anchor*.”

Varrin held up a hand, his expression growing serious.

“I’ll be happy to see it later,” he said. “The crown has called a meeting of all high-profile Delves. That includes my entire family and our associated party members.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Three days ago,” he said, expression going from serious to dark, “Timagrín’s third largest city, Canotha, was destroyed.”