

It's not that I didn't have any experience meditating. On the contrary, I had done quite a lot of it, especially after starting therapy. It was an exercise in mindfulness, and it helped ground me in the present moment. I was normally predisposed to being concerned only with worrying about what will happen in the future and what had already happened in the past. But like many good habits I'd developed over the years, it wasn't something I enjoyed doing, I just enjoyed the benefits of having done it. Still, if this could provide me with a bigger inventory while also training my aura, then the tangible benefits outweighed my intrinsic urge to procrastinate difficult tasks.

I squared my hips and moved into the lotus position, a form that was much easier to take given the limberness of my Delver body. Lotus wasn't difficult, but I'd always had tight hips and glutes. One of the consequences of a sedentary lifestyle in my youth.

I closed my eyes and began to focus on my body and the information being delivered to my senses. I took passing thoughts and concerns and placed them into a large garbage bin, which was a visual trick I used to try and stay on task when meditating. Worried about what plans I had for tomorrow? Garbage bin. Thinking about that awkward moment at the grocery store checkout line where I said "you too" to Ashley after she'd said, "thanks for shopping"? Garbage bin. Yesterday, tomorrow, errant and intrusive thoughts; garbage bin. I filled that motherfucker up and then tossed it into the ether.

After getting into the groove of the empty mind, I tried tinkering around with Grotto's guidance. First, I concentrated on dedicating my mana to growing the Closet.

**Your mana regeneration rate is being dedicated to increasing Closet space.
Namaste, bitches.**

Easy enough, though that wasn't the right way to use 'namaste'. I moved on to figuring out my aura, focusing on the idea of it filling the space around me. I formed a mental image of a bubble surrounding me, though I had no idea if what I pictured was correct. How big was the aura? It didn't have a range listed, so I'd assumed it was less of an AOE and more of a party buff. Though, if that were the case, it probably wouldn't have been called an AOE.

I worked on visualizing a bubble growing outward from my body and encompassing the entire Closet. I imagined it passing over each item within the space—Grotto, the obelisk, all the essences and the clothes—then abutting against the walls.

Before long I had a strong mental image of the room's contents. It wasn't a difficult exercise, I was always a very visual thinker. Summoning images, rotating objects, comparing color schemes, none of that had ever been difficult to me. I'd heard that some people thought solely in words, and that those folks had no concept of what it was like to create an actual image in their head. It was a mode of thinking that felt very alien to me. Not to say there was anything wrong with it, but I leaned heavily upon my visual center.

I played around with the replica Closet in my mind, imagining Grotto moving to and fro as he worked, as I tried to figure out what nine-hundred-and-one poison essences looked like with perfect visual clarity. I worked at this for a while, until my ass started to get sore. I was sitting directly on the floor of the Closet, which was made of something similar to steel. I ignored the sensation for a bit, but eventually gave into the discomfort and opened my eyes.

I was surprised to see Grotto exactly where I had imagined him while my eyes were closed, though he was working in a relatively small space around the unassembled obelisk. I surveyed the essences on the walls, and it seemed like their density and pattern matched what I'd been imagining. I stood up with a grunt and went out to my rented room to grab a blanket and a throw rug. I tossed them on the ground where I'd been sitting, then reassumed the position and went back in.

I tested my mental image a few more times, opening my eyes to find Grotto exactly where I thought he was. At first I thought it may have been due to the subtle perception of the sound of his feathers rustling as he moved, but the feeling I got was more like the sensation on my skin when a finger is hovering just above the surface. Not quite touching, but still creating a sensation in the flesh. The anticipation of touch.

As I continued to focus on the feeling, Grotto's presence grew more distinct, while the rest of the room faded. Eventually, my mental image of Grotto was nearly as vibrant and real as when I opened my eyes. I kept pushing into the experience until I was startled out of my trance.

Your *Who Needs a Cleric?* skill has risen to level 2! +10% Aura Range. Maximum base effect increased by 1.

Through meditation and self-reflection, you have earned +1 Wisdom!

Well, shit. That wasn't hard at all. I was worried that training a stat might take months of effort, or weeks at least. I just casually meditated for a bit, and got the equivalent of a copper Delve's worth of points. I'd have to make Varrin think I worked a little harder for it, lest his envy grow even greater.

I decided that was as good a place as any to call it for the night. I left Grotto to his work, and went back out into the inn room to find the first dregs of daylight creeping in through the windows. What I'd thought had been a casual hour or two of meditation had been closer to eight. I shrugged, resigning myself to missing a night of sleep, and got ready to hit the books.

Hiward had three major libraries, one of which was maintained by the Supplicants of Astrania within Formation, very close to the Temple of Creation. I used the wooden chip Supplicant Hierti had given me to gain entry, and was provided with a brief tour of the facility. The Delver's Library was, as its name suggests, one of the preeminent sources of literature concerning all aspects of Delving, from spell catalogs and technique manuals, all the way to the history of Delves and sociological surveys of their impact on modern culture. All of that was of incredible interest to me, but I resisted the urge to start doing deep dives on the mechanics of delving, opting to focus on something that would dramatically improve my chances of surviving Hiwardian culture:

Etiquette.

I tore through several modern manuals describing the appropriate attire and mannerisms at different levels of society, then chewed through a less rigorous treatise concerning the nuance of 'commoner' interactions. I took the latter work with a heavy grain of salt, finding it akin to something like a Fox News article about the nuance of the words 'drip' or 'bet'. Probably not the most reliable source, but better than nothing.

I made my way through the pile of books much faster than I'd expected. My reading speed was substantially quicker than it had been in my old life, and I could fly through the text without losing my train of thought.

I also felt like my retention was better, immediately able to start applying the knowledge to my view of the interactions taking place between the people within the library. Subtle gestures that spoke of relative rank. What a specific type of bow meant about the person giving it and the one receiving. How the Supplicants keeping one arm tucked behind their back was a historical vestige of a time when the left hand was kept pristine in the event they needed to hold a noble's coat or other personal item. The practice was

now considered archaic, and didn't even hail from Hiwardian origins, but the Supplicants were devout to some of the older ways.

I moved on from etiquette and dug into world history at large, then to the history of Hiward, then to the history of the Delves. I stopped myself at absorbing one textbook's worth of information about each subject. I wasn't trying to become an expert, just hold a conversation without exposing myself as an extra-dimensional alien invader. I lost track of time again, skipping lunch and then being politely asked to leave as I neared the end of Ultrig Tootef's *On Delves*.

The reward for my studies was more than just the knowledge I'd gained, but also an additional point to intelligence and the option to pick up the Academics intrinsic skill. The skill increased my rate of study and retention, while also giving me a bonus to identifying bogus information. It seemed nice enough, but I kept it on the backburner for now.

I hit up a deli on the way home and munched on some brisket while going over Grotto's progress for the day. The obelisk was nearly finished, and just needed a jumpstart to get working. It was much smaller than the obelisk inside the Delve of Grotto's namesake, the black pillar standing about twelve feet tall, as opposed to thirty. The ceiling of the Closet was currently only around fifteen feet up, so that made sense. I'd managed to add an extra thirty-two square meters to the space with my meditation session the night before, but against the pre-existing two-thousand, it was a marginal increase. I'd tried to focus on raising the ceiling, and maybe I had. By an inch or so.

The body of the obelisk was covered in a series of runes like the ones carved into the iron rod that now sat at its center. At Grotto's instruction I placed my hand on the obelisk, and it wicked away half my mana before the symbols began to glow and Grotto proclaimed the Delve as having officially begun.

*[Our might shall roll over the lands like a sable wave of **despair** as we assert our will, **dominant** over all who oppose us!]*

[No one is really opposing us right now.]

[*Oh, they will.*] His psychic voice dropped to a whisper. [*They will.*]

All megalomania aside, the Delve was now technically up and running, and Grotto informed me that he was able to dedicate the mana generation from the obelisk itself to the growth of the Closet without requiring me to actively meditate inside. It had something to do with our Shared Fate evolution and allowing *me* to jumpstart the

obelisk rather than Grotto. Pretty sure he used some words that weren't real while explaining.

At one point his sentences morphed into a sort of internal shrieking sound and I told him to stop telling me how it worked after I got a migraine. Whatever it was he'd been saying, it didn't seem like the System wanted me hearing any of it. Either that or it was cursed eldritch knowledge too big for my mortal mind to comprehend.

Pocket Closet has gained a new function: Pocket Delve!

Current mana production: 24

All mana currently assigned to Closet expansion.

Now that the Delve was going, the Closet would automatically expand at a rate of fifty-seven point six cubic meters per day, regardless of whether I paid it any attention. So, after a year, it would be roughly eleven times bigger than it was currently. If that were a stock portfolio, I'd be rich inside of three years. As it sat, however, I couldn't imagine how long it would take to reach the size of Grotto's old Delve. The place must have been hundreds of millions of cubic meters.

[I suspect the amount of Dimensional mana we have access to will increase as the Closet expands into the pocket space,] thought Grotto when I asked. [There are other ways we might speed up the process as well.]

If the Delve ended up being a self-perpetuating, compound-growth machine, then maybe it wouldn't take too long at all. Like one of those idle games where you begin by doing one damage per tick to an MS paint dragon enemy, then get to a hundred damage after an hour, but after a day of letting the game run you were doing a trillion damage to a thousand MS paint dragons all at once. Could name the place NGU Delve, or Delvor Idle, or Delver Tycoon. Pocket Delve had a good ring to it, though.

[So now that the place is running, what are you going to spend your time on?]

[Traps, of course.]

[Yeah...Of course. I guess you'll need-]

[More supplies.]

[More supplies. Sure.]

I mean, at some point it had to pay off, right?

I got in some more meditation time without falling into a meditation induced stupor, got some good sleep, then went out to get Grotto some more stuff to craft with. I went back to the library and started working on studying Hiwardian economics, political science, legal code, sociology, a splash of philosophy, and an overview of the major world theologies.

Acquiring a familiarity with all of those topics took me through the rest of the week, until my new underground abode was complete, and netted me another four to my intelligence. I also picked up another two points in wisdom from meditating in the evening.

Wisdom now sat at seven, with Intelligence at ten, and I was offered my first Intelligence evolution.

Your Intelligence has reached a score of 10! I'd love to make a joke about how smart you are, but you probably wouldn't think it's clever enough. Your loss! Choose one of the three following evolutions:

1: *Resilient Thinker*: You are significantly more resistant to attempts to break your concentration and far less likely to be stunned or surprised by unexpected events.

2: *Magical Thinker*: You acquire a basic understanding of any spell after seeing it fully cast a single time.

3: *Visionary Thinker*: You gain a near eidetic memory for visual details.

Resilient Thinker was on brand for me to become an implacable wall of man, both physically and emotionally, but it would absolutely *ruin* surprise parties. It also didn't seem particularly...fun? Maybe not the best parameter to be basing my life-or-death

build choices on, but I learned a long time ago that I perform a lot better when I enjoy how I'm accomplishing a task, even if the method itself is less efficient.

Magical Thinker and *Visionary Thinker* provided a very difficult choice. In some ways, I could brute-force acquire *Magical Thinker* by loading myself to the gills with magical knowledge. If I were the resident expert on all things arcane, then I'd probably be able to identify spells and their likely effects without much trouble, similar to what the ability did. Picking up *Magical Thinker* would just save me all that time and effort, which could be spent elsewhere.

The biggest benefit would be identifying magic that hadn't yet been cataloged or studied. If I *did* end up breaching the wall between dimensions and duking it out with some otherworldly monstrosity, then being able to discern the effects of their magic, *ex nihilo*, would be pretty nice.

Visionary Thinker was self-explanatory. I always wanted to be able to Sherlock Holmes it up, and this seemed like a grade-A skill to take me one step toward that fantasy...

"Yes, Mr. Briarton had three cookie crumbs on his lapel which matched the texture of the snickerdoodle that Lady Rosingtonwatertingsonsire made the prior evening and thus, he is the one who snatched the herring from the lake!"

The room is filled with gasps of surprise. A woman in a red gown faints. Mr Briarton pulls a revolver from his attaché.

Alas, I would also be cursed with the inability to forget all the ugly details of events like the time I accidentally walked in on grandma Loryn's spongebath. Or things like bodies with their organs scooped out. I expected to see a lot more of that kind of stuff. The mutilated corpses, not grandma Loryn; she passed in '06.

As useful as *Visionary Thinker* would be, it didn't align with any particular *vision* I had for my build. (Too much of a dad joke? Too bad, prepare for more.) Whereas *Magical Thinker* aligned nicely with an uber-mage who happened to also have way, way too much health.

I chose *Magical Thinker*, and immediately started plotting how to find a bunch of spellslingers to spy on. First, I needed to know what kind of spells I wanted to learn. For that, I needed to know what kind of spells existed. And for that, I needed to go back to the library.

I did, also, move into my humble forty-five-hundred square foot underground abode, fully furnished with some of the finest fittings available to the up-and-coming. It was a

lovely space to come home to before opening my Pocket Closet portal and spending most of my free time inside meditating.

I focused on that for a few days, leaving only to buy food, absorb some vitamin D, and preserve my sanity. This resulted in bringing my *Who Needs a Cleric?* aura up to seven, and quickly netted me another three to Wisdom, bringing it even with Intelligence at ten.

I'll spare you the details of my evolution choices. I doubled my mana regen, giving me even more resource regeneration, because resource regeneration was awesome.

However, even though I'd officially moved into my new place, I once again had that creepy feeling of being watched. It wasn't *just* when I was out on the town, it was even inside my own house. I spent several hours going over the place looking for hidden devices or mana-weaves that weren't supposed to be there, but this was obviously hindered by my abject lack of expertise concerning spycraft.

Still, having found nothing despite my search, I once again chalked it up to paranoia and moved on with my life. I emerged from my self-imposed academic isolation and decided that it was time to hit the gym. These muscles ain't gonna grow themselves after all, and a nice, sweaty workout should help put my mind at ease.