

The sales clerk was a bit confused when I told him I wanted to ring up sheet metal a couple of pieces at a time while I figured out exactly what we needed. They do that kind of thing for customers who need lumber and piping trimmed to custom sizes, but I guess it doesn't come up a lot with steel panels and aluminum siding. Or maybe it was just the fact that I was buying a lot more than you'd need to fix a hole in the roof, but not nearly enough for a construction project.

I didn't much care about the details, as long as he went along with it. I was a lot more concerned with exploring the limits of my newest spell. Shape Metal did exactly what it sounds like, although there was a bit more effort involved than in your typical fantasy novel. It basically gave me a toolkit of effects that could bend, cut, join and reshape metal in various ways, which was incredibly convenient. But working metal used a lot of power, and each use of the spell had a long list of limitations on speed and area of effect to keep the cost manageable.

So instead of just waving my hand and turning a chunk of metal into whatever I wanted, I had to go through a process that was a lot like using power tools to work the material. My magic was a lot faster than conventional tools, not to mention less noisy, and it could achieve some unique effects like seamlessly bonding pieces of metal together. But someone who didn't know what they were doing could have wasted all day fiddling around without accomplishing anything.

Fortunately I've always been handy with this sort of thing, and my work experience was all in mechanical engineering instead of something more abstruse. I got the hang of things pretty quickly, and started putting together our gear.

Shasa's strength was somewhere up in Olympic weightlifter territory, so I figured she'd be able to manage a metal shield. Steel might still be too heavy to lug around all day, but aluminum was fairly light and still much stronger than wood. Not to mention that it would just bend instead of splintering, so repairing damage after a fight would be easy. I stacked a couple of 3' square panels together to get a sheet a bit over a millimeter thick, cut the corners off to get a round shape, and attached a couple of leather straps to one side to make a shield.

"Slip your arm through here and hold it up," I told Shasa, showing her how to hold it. She followed my instructions, and looked at the improvised shield curiously.

"What does this do?" She asked.

"It's called a shield," I said. "It keeps you from getting bitten. If something tries to pounce on you, you just hold this up so it's in the way. Then the monster just hurts its teeth on the metal."

From her expression you'd think I'd just shown her the meaning of life. "Ooh, tricky! I think I get it. Does it work on claws, too?"

She experimentally nibbled at the edge of the shield, and Jenny giggled.

"Yes, it works on pretty much everything except guns," I told her. "Do you think you could carry that around all day if you needed to? I don't want to make it too heavy for you."

She swung the shield around experimentally, and almost smacked one of the shelves next to the service station. "Aw, this is nothing. I can handle a lot more than this, Tom."

"In that case give it back for a minute, and I'll add another layer. I don't want it to break if something big jumps you."

"A big enough animal would just bowl her over," the sales guy pointed out helpfully. "Unless you're going to give her a spear or something."

"Weapons are next," I said, considering the issue. Spears are simple, but how would you fit one in a car? Not to mention that Shasa seemed a bit clumsy in her new body, and she wasn't exactly the sharpest tool in the shed. Give her any kind of edged weapon and I could easily see her cutting the wrong

person by accident. Or herself. Or forgetting about edge alignment, and whacking a monster with the flat of her weapon instead of cutting it.

Yeah, something simple was a better bet for her, at least for now. A length of steel pipe with a couple of pounds of steel cable wrapped around one end made a serviceable mace, once I'd fused the metal together. I handed the result to Shasa, and she frowned at it.

"I don't get it, Tom. How does this work?"

"You just hit things with it," Jenny said.

Shasa wrapped her hand around the middle of the handle, and made a punching motion. "Like this?"

"No, silly. Hold one end of it, and hit things with the fat part."

She adjusted her grip to hold the head of the mace, and made another punching motion. "Like this? Won't my fingers get smushed?"

"No, no. Here, let me show you." Jenny took the mace, twirled it in her hand and aimed a lightning-fast blow at the nearest shelf that stopped half an inch short of connecting.

Shasa's eyes went wide. "Whoa! How did you do that? That was so cool!"

"What do you mean, how? You just hold it and whack stuff with it. It doesn't get any simpler."

I groaned. "Um, Jenny, I think we're going to have to break that down a little more. Hitting things with sticks is a monkey instinct, right? Dogs don't do that. I bet she doesn't have whatever specialized motor functions we use for aiming hand-held weapons."

Jenny blinked at me in confusion. "Wait, what? You think she still has a dog brain? But she can talk."

"Yeah, and she says she's a dog. Let me check something else. Shasa, have you ever played with balls?"

"Balls? Balls are great! I know how to fetch. Hey, I bet I can fetch really good now! I have really long legs, and I could grab the ball with my hands!"

"I'm sure you could, Shasa. But can you throw a ball?"

"Huh? You mean, like how people make balls fly? No way! That's magic, isn't it?"

I turned back to Jenny. "I rest my case. The System gave her speech and sapience, but it didn't rewire her whole brain to work like ours. We're lucky it bothered to upgrade her vision."

"That's so weird," Jenny said.

"Um, did I do something wrong?" Shasa asked diffidently.

I sighed, and scratched her ears. "No, not at all Shasa. We just need to remember that you're really still a dog on the inside, not a human with a tail."

"On the inside? Oh! Do you mean like how Jasper's a lazy buttface, because he's a cat, and Jenny is really smart and sneaky because she's human, and I'm a good girl because I'm a dog?"

"That's right, Shasa. You just keep on being a good dog, and we'll figure everything out. Okay, I bet you can learn how to hit things with a mace, if we show you how. It might take some practice, but it's a lot easier than throwing things. Jenny, maybe you could walk her through some simple bashing motions?"

"Not in the store, please," the clerk put in. "If she starts flailing around with that thing she could kill someone."

"Good point," I conceded.

“Finish my gear, and I’ll take her outside to practice while you do yours,” Jenny suggested. “There’s a patch of trees right on the other side of the parking lot. I’m sure we can find something to use as a target.”

“Or something could find you,” I pointed out. “No, I want us to stick together for now. We can try that when we’re done here. Do you want a shield for yourself?”

She considered that. “Maybe? I don’t know. It would be great when we’re stuck fighting something at close quarters, like inside a house. But it seems like it would get in the way outdoors. I’d rather just dodge and circle around to backstab while Shasa tanks.”

“Alright, then let me see what I can do about armor.”

Real plate armor is far too complicated to just whip up in a couple of hours, even if I’d had a complete design handy. But I could make a few individual pieces for each of us, as long as I kept things simple.

Bending a sheet of steel around Jenny’s forearm to get the shape of a bracer was easy enough, but turning that into something she could wear took a lot more work. I had to slice it lengthwise into two pieces, add hinges and a latch to let it open and close, and attach a layer of rubber padding to the inside. It took a good twenty minutes of trial and error to work out the design, but once I had it down making more was pretty straightforward.

The resulting bracers covered Jenny’s arms from wrist to elbow, and were sturdy enough that I doubted even the biggest animal could dent them. Jenny put them on, and grinned.

“Oh, yeah, this will work. Next time something tries to bite me I’ll just shove my arm in its mouth and let it break its teeth on these puppies.”

“Ouch,” Shasa said. “That would hurt.”

“That’s the idea, girl. What about the rest of my sexy bod, Tom? Think you can whip up some boob plate?”

“As stacked as you are now, that might not just be pandering,” I said. “Can you imagine trying to squeeze yourself into a normal breastplate, and then getting hit by something?”

She winced. “Yeah, that would suck. Okay, boob plate it is. With lots of room for extra padding in there, too.”

I chuckled. “That’s a thought for the future, but it’s going to take time. I can shape the metal without too much trouble, but putting together all the straps and buckles to hold it in place could be a real project. We might be better off going for brigandine, if anyone in the group can sew.”

“Brigandine. Is that, like, the Roman legionnaire armor?”

“Almost. The romans used lorica segmentata, which is a bunch of metal plates held together with leather straps on the inside. Brigandine is a garment made of heavy cloth with the metal plates riveted to it. It’s supposed to be a lot easier to make, and sturdier too. But even with magic I expect it’s going to take at least a day to figure out how to make some.”

“We don’t have a spare day to fiddle around with stuff,” Jenny complained. “Besides, it’s July. If we go walking around in something like that for any length of time we’ll all die of heat stroke.”

“Hence my search for simpler alternatives. Okay, I’m just going to make bracers and shields for all of us, and some kind of head protection for Shasa. Everything else will have to wait. I figure I’ll buy a hundred pounds or so of sheet metal, and experiment with it in the evenings until I come up with something.”

“I guess that will work,” Jenny conceded. “How do you know so much about armor, anyway? Are you in one of those medieval reconstruction groups or something?”

“No, I just have an interest in the engineering side of military history. If you want someone to build a trireme or design a castle I’m your guy. Right now I’m wishing I’d spent the time studying gunsmithing and explosives instead.”

“Hah. I don’t know, some of that stuff sounds handy. I wonder how much magic it would take to build a castle?”

“More than I’m going to have anytime soon,” I told her. “But I suppose it’s something to think about.”

Helmets can get surprisingly complicated, and I didn’t have hours to spend making some over-engineered marvel. But I wasn’t trying to stop bullets or arrows, so it didn’t need to be all that elaborate anyway. What I came up with for Shasa was basically a steel pot with holes in the top for her ears, a pair of safety goggles mounted on the front and foam padding attached to the inside. It left her neck and the bottom half of her face exposed, but solving those problems would have added an excessive amount of complexity for a first attempt.

My final creation was that spear Jenny had been asking for. Attaching a bayonet blade to a steel pipe was easy enough, and I could thread more pipes together and meld them into a single piece to make the weapon as long as I wanted. But anything more than about four and a half feet long would be hard to transport in a car, and that was way too short to make a good spear. I was also concerned about the weight, since a metal shaft was a lot heavier than the wood that historical weapons used.

Jenny hefted the prototype, and shrugged. “It’s a little awkward, but not too bad. I think I can handle it okay as long as you don’t make it too long, and that’s without any more buffs. If we’re halfway successful the weight won’t even matter in a day or two.”

“Good point. Alright, but I’m going to have to make it break down for transport. You’ll have a four-foot section that’s all one piece, then another four-foot section of shaft that screws on. I should probably put a crossbar on it too, like a boar spear.”

“Put a spike on the butt end,” Jenny suggested. “In case I need to ground it.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Sounds like I’m not the only one who’s studied some medieval warfare.”

She flushed a little. “Nah. I, um, used to play D&D back in high school. Our DM was really into that stuff. I’ll never forget the time I got trampled by centaurs.”

I chuckled, and went back to work.

All in all the whole side trip ended up taking almost three hours, but I was feeling a lot better about our chances of surviving. With our new protective gear in place I rang up a respectable stack of raw materials, which we all hauled out to the cars. Then we drove over to the back of the store’s expansive parking lot, where there was a patch of undeveloped land covered in trees.

“Okay, Shasa, I’m going to show you how to use your mace. Watch close, now.”

I explained the concept of hitting things with the ball, and demonstrated a simple horizontal swing on a pine tree. The weapon smacked into the tree with a satisfying crack, and knocked some bark off.

Shasa bounced on her toes and clapped. “That looks fun! How did you make it do that?”

I handed her the mace. “Here. Hold the handle like I showed you, and I’ll walk you through it. Have you got a good grip? Okay, pull your arm back like this. Good, now see how the mace is sticking up? Turn your wrist like this, so it’s sticking out sideways instead. Now swing your arm like this.”

She followed my directions with an adorable frown of concentration on her face, and her weapon touched the tree.

“That’s it. Do that a few more times, until you’ve got it down.”

"This is complicated," she complained. "Back, and swing. Back, and swing. Oh, I think I get it! I just do it faster if I want to hit something for real?"

"Exactly. Give it a try."

She pulled the mace back, and whipped her arm around in a blur of motion. The mace flew out of her hand, and sailed twenty feet into the woods before hitting a tree.

Jenny laughed. "Whoops."

Shasa gave her hand a betrayed look. "Hey! How did it get away?"

I decided that trying to explain centrifugal force would be a lost cause. "You have to hold on harder when you move it around fast, or it will slip out of your hand. Don't worry, humans do the same thing when they're young. It just takes some practice to get the hang of holding on to things when you're swinging them around."

Shasa jogged into the woodlot to retrieve the mace, and tried again. This time she misjudged the distance, and completely missed the tree. She spun in a complete circle before falling on her butt, and dropping the mace.

Jenny giggled. Shasa pouted. "Don't laugh at me! I'm really trying, here. I've only had hands since this morning."

"I'm sorry, Shasa," Jenny said. "That just looked really silly. I'll try not to laugh again."

"Here, this is where you want to stand," I said, guiding her to a spot a little closer to the tree. "Now, firm grip, pull your hand back, get ready, and swing!"

This time she got it right. The mace struck the tree with a loud crack, and a cloud of broken wood exploded from the impact point.

"Ow!" Shasa dropped the mace, and clutched at her hand. "It bit me!"

"What?"

"She was holding it too tight," Jenny observed.

Shasa kicked the tree, and glared at the fallen weapon. "That really hurt! I don't think it likes me, Tom."

"I'm having some doubts about this," Jenny agreed. "Can you imagine how much practice it will take before she can do that in a fight? Maybe we need to think of something that's more natural for a dog."

"Like what?" I asked. "Wolves normally bite their prey, but I can't see that working out."

"Claws?" Jenny suggested. "Some breeds of dog dig, right? Or, I don't know, brass knuckles? Hey, Shasa. If something tried to attack us right now, how would you fight it?"

Shasa blinked at her uncertainly. "Um, I guess I'd jump on it and bite it. Clawing stuff is more something cats do. My nails aren't sharp, so paws are mostly just for holding prey down while you bite it."

"Well, that's not going to work," Jenny sighed.

"Why not?" Shasa asked. "I know I'm kind of dumb, Jenny, but I'm big and strong. I could rip a monster's throat out easy."

Jenny frowned, and gave her a speculative look. "Show me."

"What? I don't want to hurt you, Jenny!"

"Well of course I don't want you to really bite me," Jenny said. "Just show me how you'd do it. You know, like when puppies play fight?"

"Oh, okay! Ready or not, I'm gonna get you now!"

She jumped at Jenny, much faster than I'd thought she could move. Jenny ducked and threw her over one shoulder with some kind of martial arts move. Shasa landed in a heap, and quickly scrambled back to her feet with a playful growl.

But she didn't look like a cute beach bunny with dog ears and a tail anymore. Her face had grown a muzzle full of sharp teeth, and her posture was hunched over like a gorilla. Her hands dug into the grass, and she launched herself into another pounce.

"Whoa!" Jenny shouted, tumbling out of the way. "Since when did you turn into a werewolf?"

"Since just now. Grr! I'm gonna get you!"

I watched them dance back and forth for a few minutes, trying to grasp how Shasa moved and thought. Normally she wasn't quite fast enough to catch Jenny, but those long legs could produce explosive bursts of power. As often as not Jenny had to resort to judo throws to redirect her attacks, tripping her or sending her flying. Shasa clearly had no idea how to respond to that, so she just kept trying the same moves over and over with the same result. But she also wasn't getting hurt by any of those tumbles or falls, and she was much too strong for Jenny to grapple with her.

I was about to call a halt to the exercise when something heavy and sharp smashed into my back, sending me sprawling. A blur of fur and teeth lunged for my throat, and I barely fended it off. Then I was on the ground, flailing frantically while something small and way too fast zoomed around me clawing and biting.

"Tom! Ow, what the fuck?"

"Squirrel! Grr. Get it get it get it!"

Rolling over didn't work. Flailing wasn't working. I was bleeding everywhere. Desperately, I conjured a flame missile and held it in my hand.

The furry menaces retreated, chittering angrily. There were three of them surrounding me, and as I finally got a decent look at them I saw that Shasa was right. They were mutated squirrels, a bit bigger than a housecat and fast as greased lightning. A glance showed me Shasa ripping one apart with her teeth, while Jenny tried to fight off a whole swarm with a knife in each hand.

Good thing they were still afraid of fire, but that didn't help anyone else. The damned things never stopped moving, and there was no way I was going to hit such an agile target with a gun. I tried conjuring a small, fast force missile in my free hand, but the squirrel I threw it at dodged easily.

I had one unspent enhancement point of each type, and I wasn't going to die with any of them still in the bank.

"System, give me an enhancement to my missile spells that lets me make seeking projectiles."

It didn't bother to display any screens, or maybe it was just smart enough not to do that in the middle of a fight. But I could feel new options appearing in my mental toolkit. Of course, that was so obvious. In close quarters like this I only needed an effort of will to stick an invisible target designator spell to an enemy. Then add a simple seeking function to the missile, and let it go.

The ball of fire I'd been holding shot across the field towards one of the circling murder squirrels. The furry menace saw it coming and juked to the side, but the missile smoothly tracked its motion and adjusted course. It struck, and a blast of fire turned one enemy into a smoking corpse.

Instead of running the other two rushed me. But their charge was disrupted when Shasa landed in the middle of them, growling and snapping her teeth. I targeted one of them, spun up another missile and fired it as it tried to circle around her.

The other one tried to retreat into the trees, but that didn't stop me from flash-frying it with another fire missile. Then I turned to Jenny, and found her kneeling in the middle of a cluster of bloody corpses. Her shirt was completely shredded, and she was covered in bleeding wounds.

"Jenny!" I rushed to her side, and cast a diagnostic spell.

"I'm okay," she panted. "I think. Fucking speed blitzers."

"You'll be fine," I assured her. "Your defense aura is down and you've lost a lot of blood, but I can heal that. Shasa, are you alright?"

"They bit my ear!" Shasa replied, sounded affronted. "Go away, pooppy-heads!"

I gave them both just enough healing to stop the bleeding, and then did the same for myself. Shasa must have had a stronger defense aura than we did, because she wasn't nearly as injured.

"That sucked," Jenny grumbled. "I didn't even notice the stupid things until they jumped us. Are you sure I can't have a suit of plate armor, Tom?"

"I'll work on it," I assured her. "Maybe I can come up with a shortcut. For now we should collect the XP, and retreat to somewhere more defensible."

"Right. No rest for the wicked." Jenny heaved herself up, and limped over to the nearest body. Sure enough, little trickles of green mist were seeping out of it to form a ball in the air.

"What's that?" Shasa asked as Jenny bent to touch it.

"We're not sure what to call it," I said. "But if you touch one of them it gives you energy you can use to change yourself. Like what the voice did to make you like you are now."

"Oh, neat. Can it teach me how to do people stuff like you and Jenny?"

I paused in the middle of reaching for an XP ball of my own, and thought about it. "You know, I bet it can. You'd just have to dig into your status screen and find the right option."

"My what?"

I smiled. "Say 'System, status'."

She did. Then she gasped and took a step back. "What's this? It's too close! Is it following me? Oh, no! Help, Tom! What do I do?"

"Calm down, Shasa, it's not going to hurt you."

"It's not? But there's a dog trapped in it! Is she a ghost?"

"Dogs don't get mirrors," Jenny said with a smile.

"Oh, right. That's not a real person, Shasa. The System is just showing you what you look like. The other stuff is showing all the things about you that the System can change."

"Really?" Shasa puzzled over the screen for a few moments, while Jenny and I collected experience. Finally she shook her head. "This is way too complicated for me. You do it."

Alert!

Your pet has given you access to her status screen. Use your godlike powers wisely!

I stared at it for a moment, and shook my head. Sure enough, my status screen now had a second tab that showed Shasa's stats.

"Are you sure you want to do that, Shasa? Now I can do anything I want to with your points."

"Okay," she said guilelessly. "You're in charge, Tom. Just give me whatever I need to do what I'm supposed to do."

Jenny paused in her XP collection to stare at us. "Seriously? That's so hot."

"Does that mean you want to give me your screen too?" I teased.

"Fuck, no. You can mess with my head, but not my build. It looks like we killed eight of these things, so the rest go to you and Shasa. Who I bet is going to be happy with whatever her pack leader doles out."

"Of course," Shasa said. "This is just like hunting, right? I'm the new girl, so I go last."

"Touch these two," I told her, pointing. "I'll watch your status, and see if that's enough. System, what do I need to buy to give Shasa the same talent for using blunt weapons as a typical human?"

I was momentarily confused when the response was a list of fantastically advanced (and expensive) life magic spells. But then I realized it had changed back to showing my own status screen. I switched it to Shasa's, and tried again.

"Let me rephrase that. Is there something I could purchase on Shasa's status screen to give her a human-like talent for bashing things with tools?"

That got me a closeup of the mental part of the display. Dive down past the skills and aptitudes, and there was a map of the brain that looked like something out of a neuroscience textbook. Except that instead of vague speculation the System gave terse but concrete descriptions of what everything in there did, and had options to add new features.

For some reason Shasa already had an unspent mental point, so I carefully picked my way through the process of adding the indicated motor skills to her brain. Then I double-checked that I hadn't touched anything else by accident before committing the change.

"Looks like each squirrel is worth maybe half as much as the giant possum," Jenny commented. "Which seems weird, but I guess it goes by threat level instead of volume or something. I'm putting mine right into better reaction speed, just so this doesn't happen to me again."

"I think I'm going to do the same," I said. "It's interesting that they're only giving physical points, though. I hope that doesn't mean we have to fight something with magical abilities to get more magic points."

"Give it a day," Jenny said. "I'm sure the woods will be full of fire-breathing lizards and teleporting drop bears. Maybe the smart ones will figure out how to use guns, and then they'll be worth mental points."

"There's a lovely thought. Okay, Shasa, I'm finished. Pick up the mace, and see if it feels different now."

She casually scooped it up by the handle, and swung it around experimentally. "I don't feel any different. Only, this doesn't seem so hard now."

She gave one of the trees a whack, not nearly as hard as the last time she'd tried it. "Weird. Why was I having so much trouble with this? It's really easy."

"Using tools like that is a human thing," I explained. "I had to ask the System to give you the same thing that lets us do it."

"The System is the voice I heard this morning? Okay. Thank you, Tom. This will be really good for bashing monsters."

"That's the idea. So what's with the shape changing? Can you just do that whenever you want?"

"Uh huh. The System wanted to let me eat people food, which is great, but I said I might still need to bite something. So I can do both! Pretty awesome, huh?"

Jenny limped over and gave her a pat on the back. "It is. You're kind of scary when you have all those big teeth."

“Aw, I’d never hurt you, Jenny. I’m bigger than you, so it’s my job to protect you. Right, Tom?”

“Right. You saw me throwing fire at the squirrels?”

She turned an excited look my way, and started bouncing on her toes again. “Yeah! That was amazing, Tom! I know humans can tame fire, but I’ve never seen it do tricks for someone before!”

“Well, I can do a lot of stuff like that, which is good for killing things. But I can’t do it if I’m running around dodging. So whenever we fight something big your job is to get its attention, and keep it busy while I kill it. You can protect yourself with your shield, and whack it with your mace, and maybe growl and bite if it will help.”

“Okay! I can do all of that. Hey, can I use my shield and mace at the same time? Would that work?”

“Yes, Shasa, that’s exactly what I want you to do.”

“Awesome! This is going to be great! I’m so happy!”

I chuckled at her enthusiasm, and scratched her ears. She leaned into my touch, and suddenly plastered herself against my chest.

“Well aren’t you a cuddle puppy?” I said.

“Uh huh. Thank you for taking me in, Tom. I’d be lost without a pack.”

“D’aww. You’re adorable, Shasa,” Jenny said, coming up to pat her on the back.

“I’m hungry,” Shasa declared. “Are we going to eat soon? There are plenty of squirrels for everyone, right?”

Jenny wrinkled her nose. “Eww. I’m not eating those things.”

“Me neither,” I said. “We filled up on people food just before we met you, Shasa. But if you want to see what they taste like, go ahead. I’m sure we’ll all be eating a lot of monsters in the future.”

“Okay!” Shasa slipped out from between me and Jenny, and started to skip around the battlefield inspecting the bodies. Picking out the one that looked the most appetizing?

“I guess one of us needs to learn cooking,” Jenny sighed.

“Probably, but it’s not urgent. I can roast meat over an open fire. It won’t be great cuisine, but you can eat it.”

“Maybe we should stock up on barbecue sauce,” she quipped.

I pulled her into a hug. “Maybe so. You alright?”

“Shaky,” she admitted. “That was scary as fuck. We could have died here so easily. If either of us was a little slower, or there’d been just a few more of them, that would have been it.”

“I know,” I said. “You were right about needing to get tougher, but we’re going to have to be really smart about this. The GM isn’t giving us easy level-appropriate encounters, and we don’t have any respawns.”

Jenny wormed her way deeper into my embrace, and sighed.

“Guess not. Hey, I wonder if the System can give us a HUD with a party status display, like you’d have in an MMO?”

“That does sound useful,” I said. “Let me check my options... huh.”

“What?”

“Shasa is gaining enhancement points from eating that squirrel.”