

The scene above looked like a natural disaster in action. All the shelves in the warehouse had fallen, crates were shattered and splintered, and debris lined the floor. Part of the roof had collapsed and there was a mighty gale of wind sending sharp shards of wood and gravel hurling through the air. Demarsus was at the center of the storm.

Lito's uniform was ragged and torn. Blood covered his face and I saw more than a couple places where Demarsus' axes had hit home. He leapt from a pile of rubble, throwing his burning chain at the massive Tanker, who brought an ax up to catch it.

The chain wrapped around the ax and Demarsus heaved back, pulling Lito toward him through the air. He brought his second ax up to cleave down on Lito as he drew close. Myria appeared from nowhere, a deep crimson stain on her uniform from the wound at her side, and drove her rapier into Demarsus' armpit. The big man shouted and dropped the ax, then drove his fist downward at Myria, who danced away from the attack, though she stumbled under the tempest.

Demarsus hadn't escaped unscathed either. His armor was cracked and dented, and blood ran down his legs from Myria's countless sneak attacks. Still, the big man moved as though uninjured and I wasn't confident that the pair would take him down before one, or both of them, were killed.

"Is he gold too?" Xim asked, shouting a bit over the wind.

"Yeah! Tanker!"

"We're way underleveled for this!" she said.

"That's why I said evacuate!"

"Somebody's going to die, though!"

"You want it to be us?"

"I have a new skill I can use from range! I can even charge it!"

Nuralie crawled next to me on all fours, then stood and leaned very close to me.

"He's behind all this, yes?" she said.

"No, he's a middleman!"

"Then we must speak with him."

I squinted at her, then waved at the room.

“That’s what *they’re* trying to do! He’s not feeling talkative!”

Nuralie froze, then pulled a massive frog the size of a house cat from her inventory. The wind gusting around her split and swirled, leaving her untouched by the artificial storm. She pulled out two more frogs for Xim and I. I realized I still held the flower she’d handed to me, which continued to drip, and put it away into my inventory before taking the amphibian. The wind died all around us and we suddenly no longer needed to shout.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Mountain wind-frog,” said Nuralie. “A most holy creature.”

She placed her own frog on her shoulder, where it gripped her tightly with its sticky, padded toes. Xim and I copied the move.

Even the lethal debris was swept aside by the mighty frog’s power.

“What’s the plan of attack?” asked Xim.

“There is no plan!” I said. “What can we even do to that guy?”

“Distract him,” said Nuralie. “Insult his clan-mates. Pray for the gods to smite him.”

“I’ll focus on that last one,” said Xim. She knelt and gripped her scepter, then began to mutter under her breath. Gold light began to cover her body.

“What do you think his lowest stat is?” Nuralie asked.

I pondered it for a second.

“Luck.”

“Not useful. Other than that.”

I gave it deeper consideration, and thoughts sped through my mind faster than I’d ever experienced.

Demarsus was a level thirty gold, which gave him one-hundred-and-thirty-eight stat points to distribute. He was a Tanker, at least according to Lito and Myria, which made his two highest stats Strength and Fortitude. Many of his moves didn’t trigger my

*Magical Thinker* perk, which meant they were stamina based, but several of his skills *had* triggered it.

That, on top of this persistent hurricane, indicated that he was at least somewhat built into mental stats. So, Wisdom for sure, and maybe Intelligence to some degree. He was a high level Delver leading a second life as a crime lord, and his battle shout at the beginning of the fight had a strong mental effect on his goons. That led me to believe he'd also focused on Charisma.

He moved quickly, but not inhumanly so, unlike his strength which looked to be at the level of a Greek demi-god. His strikes were precise and he had decent footwork, but was nowhere near the level of Myria. So, Strength and Fort as his mains, with Wisdom and Charisma as his secondaries. Likely some Intelligence, and given his combat performance and raw number of stats available, he probably got Speed and Agility to ten to augment his primary means of combat and claim the first superhuman trait they offered along with the level ten evolution.

"Speed or Agility," I said.

"Sticky-juice, then," said Nuralie, producing two liter-sized glass jars from her inventory. She thrust one into my hands.

"What do I do with this?"

"Throw it at him. It's sticky.

"That's it?"

"It's also flammable."

"We're like fifty feet away and if you haven't noticed it's fuckin' windy out there."

Pause.

"We get closer."

The battle before us was hardly stationary. Lito and Demarsus leapt twenty feet at a time as they barreled into one another and traded blows. How was I supposed to get close to that?

There was also the risk of Demarsus throwing an ax at one of us like a buzzsaw and cleaving us in twain in an instant. I *might* have the Fortitude to take a hit, but I doubted Xim or Nuralie did.

Nuralie got low to the ground and started crawling closer to the fight, cradling the jar in one arm. Her movement on three limbs was surprisingly quick, and she made her way into the thick of it in a handful of seconds. I bit my lip and tried to figure out my approach, when Myria went down.

She appeared just behind Demarsus, preparing for another thrust between the plates of his armor, but Demarsus was ready. He quickly pivoted and thrust a kick at her, connecting center mass with his armored foot. Myria was thrown away from him like a bottlerocket, her rapier flying from her hand. She crashed into a pile of broken shelves, boxes, and spilled goods fifteen feet away and her body went limp amongst the detritus.

She didn't get back up.

"Fuck me," I said, then cast what was quickly becoming my favorite spell: Shortcut. I used my signature move and appeared slightly above Demarsus, then hurled the jar down onto the back of his shoulders.

It smashed open and the liquid inside poured out like water, before quickly becoming thick and sticky when exposed to the air. He parried an attack from Lito, tossing the smaller man away, then spun to face me.

"Hello there," I said.

Demarsus rushed at me, unhindered by the goo, ax raised.

I cast Shortcut again and appeared behind him.

He turned and hurled an ax at me.

To which I cast Shortcut again. I'd have loved to keep that game up for a lot longer, but my next attempt failed to send me anywhere.

**Your mana is too low to cast Shortcut!**

I may have forgotten to pay attention to my mana bar.

He snarled as and fixed back onto me once more, ax returning to his hand. He raised it to throw another attack, when Nuralie's jar of sticky-juice smashed into his helmet. That was a much better throw than mine, since it got into his eyes.

The man may have legendary strength, but how strong did that make his eyelids?

As soon as Demarsus blinked to try and clear the slime from his vision, his eyes were glued shut. He dropped an ax and reached up to pry them open manually, but that gave Lito time to recover and lay a vicious blow onto the man's helm with his hammer. His head bent sideways then snapped back upright like a training dummy. Demarsus screamed in rage and swung his ax wildly in Lito's direction, but it was poorly aimed and the Guardian easily dodged it.

Demarsus wiped at his eyes, then was caught on the backfoot when Lito went in for another series of blows. The sticky-juice sizzled where Lito's glowing hammer hit, and a flame popped up here and there, but it wasn't fully catching. Demarsus was beginning to recover and managed to shove Lito away to wipe at his eyes again. Then the light of heaven descended upon Demarsus.

If heaven's light was the color of fiery blood, that is.

A pillar of crimson light shone down on Demarsus, heat pouring out of it. It narrowed into a fine beam and a bright pulse of energy shot down, crashing into him and lighting up the two liters of sticky magic napalm he'd been coated with.

Demarsus became an inferno, flames consuming his body and flaring up nearly to the ceiling. The wave of heat coming off of him was strong enough to cause me to shield my face, and Nuralie skittered away from the fight. The frog on my shoulder let out a distressed *ribbit* and I began putting distance between myself and the burning man for my new pet's safety. There was a deadly, twisting bonfire where Demarsus once stood, and the man gave zero fucks.

Demarsus' pair of axes spun out of the flaming vortex, moving around him in a spiral. The attack was a simple arc, however, not aimed at anyone in particular. That and the wind dying off signaled that the Tanker was struggling within the flames, even though he continued to move and fight without slowing. I backed off even further, stopping near Myria and briefly checking up on her.

The moment I reached to check for a pulse, a dagger was at my throat. She peeked one eye open and grinned.

"You're not Demarsus," she said, the words strained. "Pity."

"You were playing dead?"

“You’d be amazed how often it works.” She let her arm drop back down on top of the pile of wreckage she laid in. “Though it wasn’t much of an act.” She groaned and held her side.

I turned to find Xim, who was already closing the distance between us. She knelt next to Myria and immediately began casting a series of healing spells.

Lito took advantage of Demarsus’ blindness and wrapped another set of burning chains around him. The crime lord struggled against the bonds, though was unable to casually break out of them as he had done earlier. The flames consuming him began getting sucked into Lito’s chains, causing them to grow thicker and glow more brightly. Before long, most of the fire around Demarsus was gone, leaving the chains enlarged enough to cover most of his torso.

“Aw,” said Xim, “after we worked so hard to set him on fire.”

“It’s ok,” said Myria, patting Xim on the arm. “What he’s got coming is much worse.”

“Can’t ask questions if he’s dead,” said Nuralie.

I jumped at the Loson’s sudden presence, having appeared just behind me.

“Why are you so stealthy?”

“Many terrors stalk the night swamp,” she said, then failed to elaborate any further.

The wind frog on her shoulder let out a *ribbit*, followed by responses from the other two carried by Xim and I.

“Yes,” Nuralie said, nodding at the frogs, “the gogatron is a fierce foe.”

Demarsus continued to struggle, unable to break free of the enormous, burning chain links. His axes still flew back to his hands, but without free range of movement or the ability to create momentum, it looked like his ability to send them spiraling through the air was lost. His armor was blackened, and the electric crackling around the wings of his helmet had ceased. Myria managed to climb to her feet, made ambulatory by Xim’s heals, and she reached out a hand.

“I really don’t like to use this one,” she said, “but it’s the only one he hasn’t resisted yet.”

Violet light flowed from her arm toward Demarsus’ head.

You have observed the spell **Dominate**.

**Dominate**

**School: Spiritual**

**Duration: Channeled**

**Cost: 10 plus 1 mana per minute.**

**Cooldown: Variable.**

**Requirement: 30 Charisma, 10 Wisdom**

**You dominate the mind of the target, giving you total control over their actions. A dominated target cannot act of their own free will and is unable to take willful actions without your express command. If given an instruction, a dominated target will act to the best of its ability to carry out the instruction, but will otherwise behave in a docile and passive manner. A dominated target's personality is suppressed, and is incapable of acting 'naturally', even when instructed to do so.**

Demarsus was attempting to bullrush Lito despite his bindings and the Guardian had his shield up to catch the attack. When Myria's spell hit Demarsus, the man stopped in his tracks.

**"Drop your weapons,"** Myria commanded, and the axes fell from the Tanker's hands. **"Dispel all your skills, spells, and other magical effects."**

The runes on Demarsus' armor disappeared and he deflated, growing slightly smaller. He slouched heavily, as though exhausted.

**"Take a big nap."**

Demarsus slumped over and passed out.

Lito dropped his shield and studied the big guy on the ground. He pulled out his cigarette case, miraculously unharmed, and pulled out a smoke. After lighting it and taking a drag he looked around the destroyed facility, surveying the disaster and the

dozen dead or unconscious thugs I'd left in my own wake. The kid who'd led us in and the receptionist were nowhere to be seen.

"Could have gone worse," he said.

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A whole crew of mundane and Delver authorities were on the scene in minutes. A familiar level ninety Delver showed up to take Demarsus into custody moments before Myria's mana ran out. Bright blue hair, skin whiter than even the palest Hiwardian I'd seen so far. It was the same woman who'd nearly burnt out my eyeballs while I was people-watching during my first day in Formation. Her presence was still overwhelming, and I was again forced to reduce the strength of my soul-sight.

She grumbled about 'unwarranted emergency summons' until she saw her charge, where her attitude changed from irritated to outright pissed. She glared at us, then noticed the devastated surroundings for the first time and sighed.

"This is gonna be a hassle," she said in a melodic voice, then summoned her massive alabaster hand. It scooped her and Demarsus up, then flew away through the destroyed roof with the pair of them in its palm.

**You have observed the spell *Helping Hand*.**

I scanned the spell text, which looked useful—I definitely needed a flight skill—but I disregarded it when I noticed it was Divine.

One of the things I'd discovered during my studies was that the magic in this world consisted of five main schools. The schools that were available for you to learn and cast were determined by your attunement. The schools were organized into a wheel, and a person was able to utilize spells from three of these schools. First, and most effectively, the school that matches their own attunement. Then, the schools on either side of their attunement.





For me, with a Dimensional attunement, that gave me access to both Mystical and Physical magic in addition to Dimensional. However, that also put Spiritual and Divine magic out of my reach. So, no *Helping Hand* for me. I'd need to figure out another way to shuttle my fine ass around.

Beyond attunement, possessing the intrinsic skill for each school provided a better opportunity to discover and learn more advanced skills in that school, and the intrinsic skills also gave quantifiable bonuses to the spells in addition to unlocking evolutions.

With all that in mind, I ran over the other spells I'd observed during the hectic day. My *Magical Thinker* evolution gave me the opportunity to select any of the spells I'd seen as an active skill, so long as I had an appropriate attunement and an available slot. None of them were quite what I was looking for though, and being limited to ten total active skills made me want to keep an eye out for more interesting abilities down the line.

I briefly shared my experience of being attacked by the Artemix group with Xim, who told me about her own ordeal in turn. Apparently, being cloistered in prayer made her somewhat vulnerable, since her focus was entirely devoted to her god. She fasted most of the day, eating only one large meal in the evening, and the act of the prayer itself was physically demanding.

She didn't recall much about how she'd been taken, only remembering that she was in the midst of "an ecstatic divine revelation" when an intruder came into her room and cast a spell that made her very sleepy. After that didn't take, her attacker jabbed her with a needle. The next thing she knew she was staring at Nuralie. Her memories were vague, but after being provided a description of the Littan in the hat, she was fairly certain that had been her attacker. We later discovered that her attendants had been similarly put to sleep, but were otherwise unharmed at the temple.

"Do you still have to go back to praying for two more weeks?" I asked.

"Oh, no," she said. "Vengeance is a revered teaching of Sam'lia and the act of taking it is as good as any other act of devotion. Since I was attacked during prayer, Sam'lia will even see a quest of vengeance as a proper holy crusade. Punishing my would-be attackers might even earn me a new boon!" She grinned widely as she said this.

"You're *actually* happy you were kidnapped," I said.

"Yeah! Nothing really bad happened and now we get to go on a divine quest of retribution. I mean, I assume you'll come with me."

I thought about that ask. If I'm being completely honest, I *am* the type to hold a grudge. Whoever was behind sending the Artemix group after me inside my own home was definitely on my naughty list, and I would take an unhealthy amount of pleasure in finding them and letting them know exactly how I felt about their manners.

I wondered if I should start worshiping this Sam'lia if revenge was one of their religious teachings. Then again, that might rub my own divine patron the wrong way, whoever they were.

"I'd come with you even if we weren't tribe-mates," I said. Her grin widened.

*Yep. Nothing like a good ol' fashioned holy crusade of vengeance.*