

Demarsus stood as we entered and pressed his thick palms together, giving us a shallow bow.

“Guardian Lito!” he said in a rich baritone. “And Dancer Myria! What a lovely surprise to have such a distinguished pair pay a visit to my humble business.”

“Well,” said Myria, “if we’re standing on Delver titles, then it is wonderful to see you as well, Tanker Dimo Demarsus.” The three of us returned Demarsus’ shallow bow. With my recent acceptance into a Third Layer tribe, we were all of equal social standing.

“I am afraid that I am not familiar with your third,” said Demarsus.

I ran through the list of Delver titles in my mind. They were categorized based on the two highest attributes, and invoking them implied a sense of familiarity between the conversants. Myria’s Dancer title meant Agility and Charisma were her two highest stats. Lito’s Guardian title meant Wisdom and Fortitude. Demarsus’ Tanker designation was Strength and Fortitude. Fortitude was obviously my first, with Wisdom and Intelligence tied for second. That either made me a Guardian, like Lito, or a Strategist. However, I felt no particular familiarity with Low-Lord Demarsus, and there was no social expectation that I divulge sensitive information about my build on the first meeting.

“Esquire Arlo of the Third Layer,” I said. “And this is Grotto, my bonded familiar.”

Demarsus smiled.

“Always a pleasure to meet a member of the Third Layer. And it is the mark of a good man to take the time to introduce his familiar. It is my honor to make your acquaintance, familiar Grotto.”

[You may tell him that such insipid flattery will not serve to overcome the sin he has committed by antagonizing my host.] Grotto crossed two of his tentacles over his front, eyes narrowing at Demarsus.

“Grotto can be wary of strangers at times,” I said.

“Of course, I take no umbrage,” said Demarsus. “A C’thon, correct? Curious creatures at the best of times. Alien minds can be difficult to decipher. It speaks even more highly of you to be able to bond to such a creature. Please, let’s sit.”

We sat in well-worn but comfortable leather armchairs, with Demarsus behind his desk. Lito produced a cigarette and paused before lighting it, until Demarsus gave him a

go-ahead gesture. The young man who'd led us inside disappeared, closing the door behind him, but not before I noticed a small cluster of warehouse 'employees' standing outside. None of them looked pleased.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" said Demarsus, plucking a bottle and a few fluted glasses from the bar cart beside him. It looked distinctly nicer than the one on the woman's work station out front. He poured himself a glass of bubbling green liquid, then held a hand out to the other glasses. Lito nodded and the large man poured a second. I accepted a glass as well, more out of curiosity than anything. Myria once again declined.

I briefly wondered about the wisdom of accepting a drink from a potential enemy. Then again, with System notifications it would be immediately apparent if I'd been poisoned. This was also Lito's wheelhouse, and if he was game then I felt somewhat safe. He had a high Fortitude as well, so maybe he felt more comfortable taking the risk. I took a sip and it had a light and pleasant pumpkin flavor behind the burn of alcohol, like a boozy fall morning.

Lito drained his glass in one go, then sat the flute back down. Rightside up, this time.

"Ever heard the name Artemix?" said Lito, jumping straight to the point.

I nearly choked on my drink. I thought there'd at least be some sort of social dance before getting into the meat of the matter.

Demarsus' brow furrowed and he studied the liquid in his flute.

"This isn't a social call, then," he said. "Part of an investigation?"

"Please answer the question."

Demarsus took a deep breath, then sat the glass down. He sat back in his chair, folding his hands over his gut.

"*Esquire* Arlo," he said. "Such a title does not exist in the Third Layer. You also don't look like a typical denizen, so I presume you were adopted into a tribe?"

"I was," I said, then looked over at Lito. The man sat placidly, studying Demarsus.

"Esquire. A title given by nobility to peasants they deem wealthy enough that they might no longer be ignored." He held up a hand. "I mean no offense. I was also born of ... *meager* heritage. Curious, isn't it. To be raised amongst the masses and then to find ourselves in the midst of the 'elite'."

"It's an experience," I said hesitantly.

"All of the Hiwardian nobility have humble beginnings if you look far enough into the past," he said. "Not even that far! I suspect Guardian Lito's ancestors were slaves not more than three generations past."

"Is there a point to this, Demarsus?" said Lito.

His eyes weren't on the large man, however. He studied the room with an intensity I'd not seen in him before. Myria looked at Demarsus with what appeared like distant fondness, but I noticed that she adjusted her posture from relaxed to coiled, uncrossing her legs and placing her hands on her chair's arms. It was a subtle thing, and perhaps I imagined it.

Something tickled the back of my mind and I felt an odd sense of familiarity. I latched onto it, trying to figure out what had caused it. A familiar scent? A sound from my past? No, it was more of an impression. Like a person's mannerisms who'd I'd not seen in a while.

[*Your aura has found something,*] Grotto whispered into my mind. [*Focus on it.*]

"A point?" said Demarsus. "Yes, I believe so. Hiward has failed. A wonderful concept, but a broken one. Doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past, I think."

"Oh gods," said Myria, "are you about to give us your manifesto?"

Demarsus let out a single, sharp laugh.

"Ha! Myria, my dear, I wonder how you would have been eaten and spat out if you'd been born in a village, rather than an estate."

"I don't even know what that's supposed to mean."

"Of course you don't."

I closed my eyes and focused on the mental image created by my aura. After dozens of hours meditating and practicing inside my Pocket Closet, the state of clarity came easily, though a bit slower than usual given the tense environment. There was something nearby, something that I had felt before.

"Enough," said Lito. "I've asked you a question. Time to answer."

"You know, your specific skill set is a mixed blessing," said Demarsus. "What am I to say? No? Of course you'd know it was a lie. Of a hundred investigators, you alone have

spent so much time and effort building yourself for work *outside* of the Delves. The truth-seeker. Tell me, how did those skills help you when your brother was dying to mana-monsters?”

Lito shot out of his chair, Myria quickly behind him, though I didn't see this with my eyes. I felt it with my aura, which I continued to extend around me. There was something below me. *Someone* below me. I knew them. Who was it?

“Xim!” I shouted, my eyes snapping open as I shot out of my chair. The other three in the room turned to me.

“Yes?” said Myria. “What about her?”

“She's here! Below us!”

Lito pulled a glass orb from thin air. It was filled with a white, smoky substance.

“I'd rather you didn't,” said Demarsus.

Lito crushed the orb in his hand.

A wave of light pulsed through the space, and Demarsus' leather work clothes dissolved into mist, revealing full plate armor. It was dark green and gilded with gold, the helm winged and crackling with energy. There was a pair of wicked looking one-handed battle axes on the desk before him. Part of the wall behind Demarsus melted away as well, revealing a reinforced door made of dark iron.

“Your illusionist is talented,” said Lito.

“Not talented enough,” said Demarsus as he stood. “Though it was not meant to fool you, of all people.”

The axes whipped up off the desk and into his hands with unseen force. The door behind us tore open. I turned to find a dozen men and women wearing various types of cobbled-together armor. None of them were Delves, but they each held some implement of death. Shortswords, daggers, maces, truncheons, crossbows.

“Leave the officials to me!” Demarsus yelled. “The third, Arlo, is level one.” He pointed an axe at my chest. “F-tier, even with his platinum origin. Receive my strength, and restrain him for me!”

Demarsus let out a roar that shook reality.

“Look! Thugs!” said Myria, leaning into me. “Have fun watching my back!”

Veins swelled and muscles bulged beneath the skin of the mundane humans behind us, the sclera of their eyes turning red.

Then, all hell broke loose.

I watched a lot of martial-arts movies when I was young. I loved seeing Jackie Chan take on an entire gaggle of gangsters with fists, kicks, mop-handles, and the creative and aggressive use of pinball machines. Those types of fight scenes were known in the movie business as “take-a-ticket” fights. The choreography was designed to show a single fighter going up against a group of enemies in a way that made it look like they were fighting everyone at once, when they were really fighting them one at a time.

This did not reflect reality.

At first, my plan was to bottle neck the group in the doorway and fight them one or two at a time. They were all jacked up by whatever magical effect Demarsus had thrown out, and I had no idea how strong a level thirty gold effect would be when applied to normal humans. That idea was immediately discarded when Lito placed a foot in my back and launched me out of the room.

I crashed through three of the thugs before landing and sliding across the stone, my short trip brought to an end when I hit a crate hard enough for the wood to crack. I sat up in time to see the timber walls on either side of the office explode, shredded into splinters by Demarsus’ axes which spun like buzzsaws through the air. One of the axes slapped back into Demarsus’ hand, while another was buried in a translucent glowing shield held by Lito. Myria was nowhere to be seen.

Demarsus kicked the solid hardwood desk aside with the same effort I’d use to kick a small branch out of my path, and the heavy piece of furniture slid across the floor with an awful wrenching sound. Two of the legs snapped, and it buried itself a foot deep into one of the office’s remaining walls.

Then, the horde was on me.

I’d been distracted by the spectacle, and a sword and two truncheons began planting themselves into my limbs as I held them over my body for cover. Another pair of goons thrust daggers at my legs and I heard the twang of a crossbow as something pierced hard into my leg, way too close to my crotch for comfort.

I used Shortcut and appeared in the air above the group, several of whom stumbled when I disappeared. That was a technique I was starting to enjoy. None of the attacks

had done *too* much. While Demarsus' buff allowed them to bypass my Fortitude's resistance to mundane damage, they still didn't have the strength to inflict serious harm. I also didn't really want to magically massacre a bunch of non-Delvers, so I decided to take my new physical stats for a spin.

The thing about falling through the air is that you don't have any leverage. Thus, when I swung for the back of one sword-wielding goon's head, I lacked the proper footing to give much force to the swing. That was fortunately made up for by the fact that I had the inertia of gravity behind me. My fist connected a little off target, but I felt the satisfying thunk of flesh as I punched into the back of the man's shoulder. I crashed to the ground on top of him, quickly righting myself and landing another blow to the side of his head. He went still.

[Feel like helping out, Grotto?]

[Help? As uncomfortable as I am with the sensations being sent to me by our Shared Fate curse, these augmented peasants are practically splitting open with the meager mana thrust into them by that ruffian. My abilities would leave them with brains dribbling from their ears. Brutalizing the common masses shows poor leadership and will not serve to benefit our new world order.]

Two workers jumped onto my back while Grotto espoused his political theory on violence, and a sword thrust and a crossbow bolt hit me from either side. I stood, taking both men for a ride and leapt backward. I body slammed one onto the concrete floor, the other managing to let go and stumble away from me before I launched. The man at my back was left struggling to breathe, his diaphragm crushed. I kipped up and took a truncheon to the face. The woman wielding it hesitated when she hit me hard enough for the weapon to crack and my only reaction was to give her a death glare. I snatched the blunt instrument from her hand and hurled it away.

Two men grabbed me by either arm while the disarmed woman delivered a kick to my knee, sending my leg buckling. I fell to kneeling as the men tried to press my arms back into locks. The tip of a shortsword came thrusting toward my face. I ducked my head in time for the blade to catch along the top of my skull, cutting a gash across the top and back of my head. The woman piled on me as well and I grunted and shook my body like a wet dog. My Strength of seven wasn't enough to break out of three different holds from magically augmented and disgruntled warehouse workers. That was fine. I cast Shortcut again, appearing behind a crossbowman, who was lining up another shot.

While a Strength of seven may not have been enough to roleplay Hercules beating up the town guard, when combined with my Speed of five, the right hook I delivered to the

crossbowman's ear had the power and speed of a championship heavyweight boxer. The man crumpled to the floor.

I backpedaled as the remaining melee fighters spun to find me, sidestepped another crossbow bolt, then threw up an arm where a second dug into my flesh. I took the time to rip it out, then stepped into a truncheon swing from the closest fighter and ran an elbow across his nose.

Blood sprayed out from the freshly broken feature, and I knew from having my own nose broken once or twice that he'd be blinded by tears for a little while. I grabbed him by the collar and shoved him toward a man and woman coming closer with shortswords, and they caught their ally, careful not to accidentally skewer him.

I barrelled forward and between two men wielding truncheons and they swung at my back. I got low to the ground and broke past them like a linebacker, then took another bolt to the chest as I found one of the two remaining crossbowmen. I hit him in the throat with two knuckles, then stripped him of his weapon.

He coughed and sputtered, abandoning defense to clutch at his throat and I laid him out with a combination jab-hook-uppercut. I cast Shortcut again, getting behind the final crossbowman. I stomped the back of his leg, then grabbed the right side of his face as he fell and helped guide it into my rising left knee.

The fight was messy. I didn't know any graceful or efficient martial arts like kung-fu. I didn't even have basic jiu-jitsu training. If a single one of my opponents was even a semi-trained MMA fighter I would have been outclassed. At least, assuming our stats were similar.

As it was, however, these men and women weren't trained hand-to-hand combatants. I could tell they each had a basic understanding of the weapons they swung. Hell, the crossbowmen had about an eighty percent accuracy when firing, which seemed pretty fucking good. But they were bar-room brawlers and back-alley brigands, not soldiers. I took them apart through sheer force and the unfair tactical advantage of a short-range teleport spell.

I did my best to disable my opponents, but there was a very fine line between cracking skulls hard enough to take someone out of a fight and hard enough for them to shed their mortal coil. I definitely crossed that line on more than one occasion, but for the most part I curated a mass of moaning flesh on the ground. Those that were still alive and conscious gripped broken bones and dislocated limbs, guttural sounds of pain choking their throats.

[*The symphony of **agony** is sublime when performed by the orchestra of our fallen adversaries.*]

[I was already feeling kind of nauseous, Grotto.]

My awareness of the fight between the three gold combatants was distant, but their presence was unavoidable.

Demarsus' axes cut swaths of destruction through walls, crates, and shelves. The force of his blows sent Lito flying on more than one occasion, the smoking man's shield flaring with blue light as it protected him. Myria flowed around the armored man, a thin rapier finding gaps in his armor. Her form shifted in color and hue to match the background, appearing as though the alien from Predator had taken the type of ballet classes they teach at Russian assassin academies. On more than one occasion she simply disappeared, emerging from nowhere a few seconds later to plant her narrow blade into Demarsus' back.

For all her attacks did, Demarsus' face was plastered with a bloody grin.

Ok, I thought to myself, *how the fuck do I help with this?*