

242: Attempt

Rain's mind raced as the spear dove toward him—along with its wielder, appearing a good fifteen meters closer than Detection indicated. The enemy was silver, heavily armored, and utterly focused on assuring his death without stopping to say hello. There was really only one appropriate response to that.

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focusboost.sh: 500 points shifted to Focus from secondary stats
focusboost.sh: Focus: 780
modmon.sh: ['amplify aura', 'extend aura', 'channel mastery', 'aura compression',
'ethereal aura']
autocompress.sh: Target: 10 meters
autocompress.sh: Compression Applied: 182 meters
iff2.sh: offensive aura combo detected
iff2.sh: foes: unknown_entities
iff2.sh: friends: !foes
iff2.sh: ignore: none
autopower.sh: max
autopower.sh: CM Setting: 200%
ethmon.sh: Environmental Output: 0%
ethmon.sh: Environmental Occlusion: 25%
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Suppressive Radiant Immolating Fulmination (Complex)

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Increase mana costs for all foes by 151,939 mp (fcs)
106,357-121,551 light (fcs) damage per second to foes
106,357-121,551 heat (fcs) damage per second to foes
106,357-121,551 arcane (fcs) damage per second to foes
53,179-60,776 light (fcs) mitigation per second to friends
53,179-60,776 heat (fcs) mitigation per second to friends
53,179-60,776 arcane (fcs) mitigation per second to friends
Sufficient damage causes ignition
Sufficient damage causes paralysis
Aura resists 75% of environmental occlusion and absorption
Range: 10 meters
Cost: 7,680 mp/s
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The tunnel abruptly became a much brighter place. Rain and his allies were jacketed with protective energy even as their opponents were subjected to searing golden lasers and blinding blue-white lightning bolts. Immolate made itself known by the crimson interference from their armor, which was a bad sign. It meant the damage wasn't sufficient for the ignition effect, which meant the paralysis probably hadn't kicked in either. Rain grimaced as Suppression pit his will against that of the entire enemy party, but he didn't dare take his eyes from the spear wielder. The point of the man's weapon blazed with a hungry orange light, and Rain wasn't keen to learn what skill was responsible. Before the system tick came to a close, he activated Velocity, hurling Dozer one way and dodging in the other. At the same time, his stats surged, a resplendent crown settling across his brow.

The spear tracked him.

[Rain-King, me fast too!] Dozer sent, soaring toward the wall in slow motion.

With no time to argue, Rain let Velocity touch the slime at a low level as he pushed the skill higher on himself, past his limit. His muscles spasmed as he whipped an arm across to slam into the wooden spear haft. It felt like stiff-arming a steel traffic bollard, the spear wielder's skills holding it in place, but not without contest. Sensing weakness, Rain boosted his Strength and pushed with both body and soul.

Overtaxed, the skill broke. Sparks flew as the deadly point lost its lock and skittered around the side of Rain's gorget, leaving a small nick that nevertheless carved off over seventy-thousand points of durability.

Shit!

The curse had nothing to do with the damage to his armor. Force Ward had fired, draining a few thousand mana, but again, not from the hit he'd taken. As Rain tumbled, he saw Leftbeard recoiling from a distortion in the air, shards of his shattered shield flying in every direction. Some of the shrapnel pelted his mace-wielding opponent, but none hit Mora as she sheltered behind him, charging a Lightning Ball in utter disregard for her own safety. As Rain's magic ticked and he got a foot under himself, Leftbeard did the same, summoning a fresh shield with Melee Arsenal to replace the one he'd lost. The low draw from Force Ward suddenly made a bit more sense—he'd wanted the shield to break.

Ameliah, of course, had not been idle while all this was going on. She'd obviously cast the Imperial auras as her opening move, and in the background of the scene with the Entente, another spear wielder had chosen her as his target. It wasn't going particularly well for him.

Her armor aglow with power and her Velocity-charged limbs trailing visible wind, Ameliah calmly backpedaled from the spear point as she raised her bow. Her opponent was helpless to react as she aligned the point of a needle arrow with the slit of his visor. Irony bucked in her hand, the string snapped forward, and Rain saw something he hadn't spent much time considering until now—a human head undergoing a phase change, yes, but also a soul leaving the body. It didn't explode like that of the Incarn, merely zipping off in a direction orthogonal to physical reality.

Unfortunately, this was no time for pondering the afterlife unless he wanted an express ticket there himself. Rain continued his run, needing to lower Velocity a touch to control his spastic limbs. He could sense his opponent had already recovered and was right on his heels, despite having taken three full tick's worth of aura-born rebuke. The fourth tick, though, did something. As it fired, Rain distantly felt one of the enemies in the back—probably Mages—

lose whatever anti-Divination spell they'd been holding. As Suppression fell to wrap the defeated Mage like a smothering blanket, the signals in his mind snapped back into their proper places.

He whipped his head around in horror.

Three, no, *four* enemies had run straight past them, straight toward the vulnerable fledglings. One almost immediately took a splitting arrow to the middle of the back, but Rain paid no mind to the explosion or the departure of another soul. There had been *eight* enemies, not seven. One of the hostile souls had no return to Detection, nor anything but empty air where a body should be.

His auras ticked, and the three visible enemies burst into flames, tumbling as Fulmination simultaneously locked their limbs. They struck the ground just before reaching Rightbeard. The Defender had moved to defend the fledglings rather than his actual charge, but the invisible enemy slipped past him unimpeded.

There was no feedback from Suppression—no sense of soul straining against soul. It wasn't just Detection. As far as all his auras were concerned, there was nothing to target.

Horrified, Rain watched, finding little relief in realizing the enemy was targeting Legruz instead of the bronzeplates. Finding an angle, Ameliah sent a fan of arrows straight through the space where the hostile soul seemed to be, but the projectiles found nothing to bite into, continuing to slam into the wall with a worrying crack of shattering deepstone. Mora's Lightning Ball detonated behind him, and he felt both Mages expire. Pitterpatter was yowling in fury, wrapped around one of the paralyzed enemies and raking their rigid body with hundreds of

claws. Genn executed another—or tried to—his coup de grâce failing to pierce his target's armor.

The ghostly soul reached Legruz, and space seemed to twist. The Illuminator's terrified scream cut off and he vanished, though his soul remained, carried off by the other's momentum.

Oh.

Rain kicked off with Airwalk, abandoning his stricken opponent, who'd been locked up at the same time as the others and was no longer a factor. His mind raced as he streaked past Rightbeard, reading the enemy soul's intent.

This... This whole thing... An abduction?

His auras ticked one final time, sending the remaining targetable enemies to their deaths. Boosting Detection, he searched, trying to find something, *anything*, to latch onto. If the enemy was a Space Mage as he suspected—something out of myth—there could be some tiny pathway left, some wrinkle in space tethering their pocket dimension to physical reality. That was how Avarox had found the Dark Mage's tower in Legends of the Green Wood. Unfortunately, as expected when your best idea came from a storybook, Detection came up empty.

Rain ground his teeth, Ameliah blowing past him to grasp uselessly at the empty air. He modulated Velocity on himself, intent on catching up. They just needed a way to—

[Rain-King! Idea!]

Rain blinked, then looked to the side just in time to catch Dozer as he ricocheted from a wall, trailing streamers of wind. *[What the—?]* Rain blinked again as he wordlessly gleaned the slime's plan, stumbling before he caught himself. *[Dozer...crazy. So crazy, it just might work. It will be dangerous, though. Are you sure?]*

[No!] Dozer sent, brimming with determination. *[Do anyway!]*

Taken by the utter absurdity of what they were about to try, Rain grinned and stopped running, letting himself slide with Airwalk. Staring beyond the physical, he wound up like a pitcher and, with a surge of Velocity, hurled the slime like the world's stickiest fastball.

pop

Warning

Unauthorized Liminal Void Projection
This action has been logged

Dozer ignored the filthy box, smashing straight through it as he homed in on the even filthier enemy that had stolen Man-Baby. Man-Baby was theirs to be annoyed by, no one else's. With the strength of Rain-King's throw backing his determination, he fought through the pathetic resistance of the enemy's domain until he made contact, soul to soul. With that contact, he found a path.

pop

Normally, Dozer did his best to appear where there was nothing to get in the way. He'd failed only once—the first time, before he'd really been aware of what he was doing. This time, he knew what he was doing. This time, he did it on purpose.

"Urk!"

[Higher, Dozer!] Rain-King said urgently, sharing in his senses. [That's his lung. You need to block the trachea! The tube! Block the tube where it splits! Gods, I can't believe you got in!]

[Tube!] Dozer sent, then he began to squirm with gusto.

"Gugghak!" the filthy one gurgled. The fleshy walls around Dozer quaked as the filthy one tried to expel him. It didn't work.

[Am stick!] Dozer sent happily, finding the branch and filling it completely. [Watch, Rain-King! Show how win no atrocity!]

[That was totally different!] Rain-King sent. [Now, he shouldn't be able to do anything to you without hurting himself. If he tries, you pop back immediately, you hear me?]

[Hear you!] Dozer sent, ignoring the pounding of the filthy one's fist against his chest. That wasn't dangerous. Nor was it the only pounding that was happening.

"Unhand me this instant!" Man-Baby hollered, hammering on the filthy one's back. His voice was difficult to understand from within the jacket of enemy flesh. "Do you have any idea who I am!?"

The filthy one tried to respond but could not. It took a surprising amount of effort to resist the tide of air, but Dozer had grown. He was bigger now. And stronger, too—Rain-King said.

Three long minutes passed. Perhaps it was less—Dozer had never been good with time—but finally, the pounding slowed, then stopped.

Rain breathed a sigh of relief as the unfolding pocket of space deposited a pair of prone bodies on the tunnel floor. One of them immediately sprang up, an angry and ruffled Legruz, blood dripping from his nose.

"That's what you get!" he shouted, immediately whirling and planting a boot into the crumpled Mage's side.

"Enough," Rain said, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him back. He quickly surveyed the suspected Space Mage with Mana Sight, judging the man's mana to be too low to cast anything through Suppression.

"Mouse!? Tiger?!" Legruz gasped, turning to look at them. "Did you get the rest of them?"

"Yeah, they did," Mora said, sounding a bit shell-shocked as she jogged to a stop. The fight proper had been over in seconds, but nobody had missed the truth of how much damage he and Ameliah had been flinging around. It might have been hard for the others to judge the strength of his auras, but Ameliah had almost brought the deepstone tunnel down on them with a single shot. That painted a pretty clear picture.

"The rest of you, stay there," Ameliah called, addressing the others before they drew too close.

"Ah, my apprentices survived," Legruz said, sounding pleased, dabbing at his nose with a lacy handkerchief. "And Pitterpatter, of course. Good, good."

"Let's see what this guy has to say," Ameliah said, kneeling beside the prone Mage. Without making the slightest effort to be gentle, she tore the jewelry from his ears and tossed it aside before rolling him onto his back.

[Okay, Dozer, out of there and back in my soul, please,] Rain sent, watching dispassionately as Ameliah wrapped an armored hand around the Mage's throat, pinning him to the floor.

There was a muted pop.

[Home safe!]

[Good work, now have a rest. You earned it.]

"Guuuh!" the black-clad Mage gasped, inhaling a huge gulp of air and bucking against Ameliah's restraint as she hit him with Healing Word.

"Don't move unless you want that breath to be your last," Rain said, bearing down with the full weight of his domain and not having to play up his rage. Ameliah visibly tightened her adamant-clad fingers to hammer the point home.

Instantly, the Space Mage froze.

"Who do you work for?" Rain demanded.

The man's response was so cliché that Rain almost didn't react in time. A crack sounded as one of his molars shattered from the force of his bite, releasing something into his mouth—something that drained over fifty thousand mana through Chemical Ward before Purify wiped it away.

"I don't think so," Rain said. "Tell us who you work for. Is it the Foundry?"

The man didn't reply, but to Rain's soul sight, the word 'yes' might as well have been written on his forehead in flashing neon. A moment later, he tried to bite his tongue—as if that would do anything—but Force Ward was ready for him this time.

"Do you know who we are?" Ameliah asked, to which the answer was no. "Why did you attack us?" she continued.

That was too open-ended for Rain to read a meaningful response, but before he could rephrase it into a yes-or-no, he felt a sudden pressure against Suppression. Whatever the spell was, it failed to activate, the last of the man's mana evaporating to no effect.

"None of that," Ameliah said. She relaxed her fingers from where they'd dug into the man's throat in response to his attempted cast. "Your life belongs to us now. It ends when we say. Speak."

The man looked away, remaining silent.

He doesn't feel like a fanatic, so... Shit, the Bank has his family, don't they? And they're listening. They have to be. How else did they know to send out their kill squad once we started discussing ways around the bypass? They...what? Saw an Illuminator strolling up to their checkpoint with a light escort and decided it was worth the risk? The timing's too convenient for it to be anything else. We must have tripped a ward. Unscrupulous opportunistic assholes.

Rain grimaced, his rage replaced with resignation. He looked down at their captive with a frown. "So be it. A quick death."

If this guy lives, they lose their plausible deniability.

The pain twisting his guts gave him some measure of solace. It wasn't getting any easier.

"I—" Legruz began, intending to argue, but Rain quelled him with a glare.

"This never happened," Rain said. "Do you have time for a house war? I don't. Whoever sent these assholes is listening; else, this guy wouldn't be so keen on keeping his mouth shut. They have his family, or I'll eat my helmet." He looked at the Mage and saw his guess was accurate enough before returning his focus to Legruz. "You think they're just going to let us haul him to Nadir and risk him talking?" He snorted, then looked to Mora. "No, we'll show him the only mercy we can, then we'll take the bypass. Nobody will stop us unless they want some mercy too. We won't even stop to loot the bodies. If we don't take any evidence, we won't give them a reason to hunt us down, and the gear's probably bound anyway. Any objections?"

"None from me," Ameliah said. "Best we can do under the circumstances. We have to be fast, though."

Rain controlled his expression as he waited for Mora's reply, unwilling to compromise his mercenary persona by showing doubt. The Foundry would burn for this—or its leaders, at any rate. He didn't have the power to make that happen today, but one day, there would be a reckoning.

"I agree," Mora finally said. "The Entente saw nothing. There will be no report."

"Legruz?" Rain asked.

"You have my silence!" Legruz said with conviction, his vindictive fury forgotten. "His poor family! Oh, the tragedy! I shall paint a mural in their honor!"

Ameliah got to her feet, removing her hand from the Space Mage's throat. The man just lay there, making no move to resist as she summoned her bow.

"I cannot watch!" Legruz declared, turning away and pressing the back of a hand to his forehead.

"I don't suppose there's any chance you'll tell us your skill list?" Rain asked, looking down at their captive.

"No," the defeated Mage said tiredly, closing his eyes. "My employer would object. To me saying, and to you knowing."

"Damn," Rain said with a sigh.

"We're on the same side in this," Ameliah said, drawing back an arrow. "Your death buys not just our freedom but that of your family. You've stayed loyal, so they've got no reason to hurt them once you're gone. You know that, or you wouldn't have tried to do it yourself. Please let me help you this time. And for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Even for her, that was a bit too much compassion toward someone who'd just attacked them. Rain realized what she was doing an instant before he felt the party link snap into place. The Space Mage's eyes shot open as Unity brushed against him, adding him—and his skills up to tier three—to the collective.

Rain only had an instant to look at the list before Ameliah's arrow sent his soul to the beyond, but an instant was enough. With his memory, he'd be able to recall it at his leisure.

It was...something.

It didn't make him feel any better, but it was something. As was the fact their side had come out relatively unscathed.

He'd take it.