

My evolution, *Magical Thinker*, required me to see a spell in order to gain an understanding of it. However, I hadn't seen any obvious sign that someone had cast a spell before the feathered hand tore open a hole in the universe. My *Magical Thinker* ability still sent me a notification despite this, which meant that either the skill description was misleading, or I didn't have to understand who cast the spell or how, to still receive its benefit.

**You have observed the spell: *Dimensional Summon***

***Dimensional Summon***

**Cost: 30 Mana plus 30 Mana Tribute per Hour.**

**Cooldown: 24 Hours**

**Requirements: Dimensional Magic, Mystical Magic**

**You open a portal to another plane, summoning a creature to act as your guardian for as long as you pay the mana tribute, or until the creature dies or is dismissed. The strength of the creature summoned is based on the caster's own might and the type of creature summoned is based on personal affinity.**

A seven foot tall monster wrenched itself out of the portal. It had a vaguely feminine shape, though it was tough to tell through all the plumage. It had an oversized head with two massive, golden eyes set in the center, and a sharp beak just below. Its head swiveled a hundred-and-eighty degrees to survey our group, then swept back over the Chovali.

"BATS!" it squawked. "DELICIOUS!" Then it leapt off the deck, shattering planks and sailing toward a Chovali holding a suspiciously empty crossbow.

While the bird-thing had been crawling from its portal, Ember dismissed her ornate longbow, then shrugged off her thick traveler's coat. The shirt beneath was sleeveless, exposing her arms and shoulders.

Ember was *jacked*. The reserved archer had a body that looked like it belonged in a World's Strongest competition. It was definitely *not* the willowy elf body I was expecting, but the muscles made sense when she pulled out her next bow.

The thing was taller than she was, and she produced an arrow that was at least half my body in length. As she nocked it, and while the owl cannoned toward its target, the cliffside Chovali started firing their crossbows. Well, that wouldn't do.

Time to pull the adds.

I threw my hand to the sky and began chanting at the top of my lungs as the battle finally kicked off.

"I beseech you, gods of volatile chemical reactions! Lords of potential energy and barely contained eruptive might! Empower me as your vessel and I shall make irresponsible use of your booming fury! Now! Behold! EXPLOSION!"

I snapped my fingers, having channeled fifty mana into the spell *Explosion!*. My target was a Chovali at the center of its formation on the eastern cliff face, who was busying himself launching bolts at Ashe and Lito along with his buddies.

The boom wasn't *quite* as big as Seinnador's, despite pumping it full of juice, but the Chovali I targeted was turned to a meaty pulp, with several of its closest allies receiving surprise amputations and shattered spines. The rock and earth behind the beastmen detonated into flying shrapnel that pegged several more, and some of the smaller chunks made it all the way to the ship's deck, landing with clatters and thuds. Then the cliff face began to collapse.

Everyone on the battlefield knew exactly who had cast the spell.

The Alpha charged toward me, but slowed when Ember fired her fantasy equivalent of a fifty-cal at his center mass. The Alpha swiped at the arrow, shunting it aside where it rocketed into the cliff-face, creating a miniature explosion of its own, blasting away dirt and rock. Ember fired three more times in less than a second and the Alpha swapped targets to her, barreling down at the archer while it knocked aside the massive projectiles.

When the Alpha was within striking distance, Ashe appeared from nowhere directly in front of the creature. The warrior twin caught the Alpha in mid-swipe, bashing its hand away with her shield. She then drove a sword thrust at its midsection, her blade wrapped in green light, but the weapon halted inches before making contact, arrested by some unseen force. The Alpha backhanded Ashe's shield, sending the golden-armored woman skidding across the deck, though she never lost her footing.

Lito's hammer ignited into its molten form and he slung a chain toward the Hammerhead. The massive bird screeched and launched off the cliff top, but Lito's burning shackles extended outward to cover the multi-story distance in an instant,

wrapping around the Hammerhead's ankle. The Guardian launched off the deck, pulled by the avian's ascent, and the pair disappeared into the night sky.

Yet another impressive technique that allowed a Delver to fly.

The chaff, as Lito had called them, had no other distractions, and a half dozen crossbow bolts pinged and clinked off my armor before a mass of flapping wings, claws, and teeth descended toward me. The closest Chovali collapsed from the air with an arrow through its throat, and I shot a quick look toward Nuralie. She dropped an onyx colored shortbow as she pulled out a glass sphere filled with green liquid, then paused.

"Duck," she said, and I hit the deck... literally.

She slung the orb at the mass of approaching bodies and it shattered in their midst, releasing a cloud of green gas that nearly gave me flashbacks. The Chovali that passed through it began coughing violently, a few dropping to their knees and clutching at their throats before vomiting with the enthusiasm of a college freshman at their first frat party. Whatever Nuralie had just used, I doubted it would have been approved by the Geneva convention.

I drew my wand with my left hand and shot several bolts of piercing force at the ones still closing from the west. The shots created a transparent, shimmering spear that traveled at the speed of an arrow, leaving inch-wide holes *through* their targets.

Three Chovali finally made it into melee range. I tossed my wand into my inventory with my left hand, while summoning my mace with my right. I swung for the fences at the first beastman to make it to me.

While Quickwind had been dressed in tattered linens, these Chovali had on hard leather, and the one I was facing down even had a small shield of wood and steel. He easily threw the shield up to block, maneuvering to guide my swing off target as much as to absorb the hit. Unfortunately for the Chovali, he wasn't a Delver, and whatever "ancient customs" the Alpha used to make himself so strong, this guy didn't engage in enough of it.

The mana-woven mace shattered the Chovali's shield, and the training I'd done for Strength and Speed gave my weapon too much momentum for it to veer off course. The beastman's spindly arm cracked under the shield, rotating his upper body and throwing him off balance. I brought up my left hand to catch his face as he stumbled, and introduced him to an *Oblivion Orb*. With all sinuses removed, he screamed and fell to the ground, clutching at his face with his one functional hand.

That guy wasn't getting back up, so I didn't worry too much when the next three tackled me.

The Chovali weren't particularly strong. Quickwind had mentioned that these were warriors—and they clearly had some skill, with the way they immediately went for joint locks and fished for gaps in my armor with claws, daggers, and teeth—but the inherent nature of flying creatures meant their bodies didn't have much weight. While the Alpha was swole, he relied on magic to fly. The mooks may have used some level of magic to help them keep aloft, but their bodies felt like they relied mostly on run-of-the-mill physics.

This meant low muscle mass and a thin skeletal frame. Maybe even hollow bones. When the trio of Chovali wrapped me up, it felt something like three anemic men with calcium deficiencies trying to muscle down a linebacker.

I was in a bad position for leverage, so I sent my mace back into inventory and went after their limbs with no skill to speak of, but a lot of enthusiasm. I didn't know how to do a proper takedown or any chokeholds more complicated than “literally just choke them”, but I knew how to reverse someone's elbow. I knew the way a knee *shouldn't* bend. I also knew my hands were durable enough for me to dislocate a jaw from inside a Chovali mouth. Well, I figured that last one out as I went.

Once I'd done enough damage for the Chovali to second guess their close-quarters tactics, I took advantage of their lowered defenses to land a couple of well placed *Oblivion Orbs*, cleanly eliminating two of them. The third was left crawling away with a crippling combination of broken wing, wrist, and leg. I didn't have time to pay attention to him, as I was already facing down several new fighters from the eastern group.

While I did a piss-poor job of dodging the Chovali attacks, I glanced at Nuralie to find her beset by three other beastmen. She held a vial that she swung in front of her, releasing a wide arc of caustic liquid that sizzled as it contacted her assailants. She held a knife in her off-hand which she handled like a pro, evidenced by two dead Chovali at her feet and the way she took a few fingers off the next Chovali to get close, but two more landed and moved in from behind her.

One of my own attackers got the bright idea of trying to scratch my eyes out, and his claws scraped against my shades. I put a stop to that by snatching his wrist and yanking hard enough to dislocate his arm. I pulled out and armed one of the Dazzlers I'd bought from Seinnador.

“Would you like a bomb?” I said, tossing the Dazzler at his chest and casting *Shortcut*.

I appeared next to Nuralie, who jumped at my sudden appearance. I grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her away from my magic guh-nade.

“Cover your ears!” I shouted, and was happy to see she wasn’t the type to ask questions mid-combat. We both threw our hands over our hearin’ holes, and I kept her smaller frame tucked behind mine as the Chovali thrust at my back with claw and knife.

*BANG!*

The sound from the Dazzler was more or less what I expected, but the light had a bit of extra oomph to it. I turned to see a half dozen Chovali grasping burning eye sockets, and brought my mace back out to play cleanup.

Braining a man who’s just had his eyes burned out and his sense of hearing replaced by a loud eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee noise may sound cruel, but... Well, it is. However, counterpoint: Fuck those guys! They murdered people, stole their shit, sank their boats, and tried to kill me and my new friends! Fuck ‘em! Fuck ‘em to hell!

As I revealed the interior of Chovali skulls for all to see, Nuralie provided the other stunned combatants with complimentary tracheostomies. She did a pretty good job, even though she *had* told me that she wasn’t a doctor.

The handful of would-be attackers who remained looked to be experiencing a change of heart, hesitating near the edge of the bloody massacre at our feet. Between Nuralie and I, seventeen Chovali lay dead, dying, or crippled from a combination of poison, acid, knife wounds, arrows, mauling, having their vital bits transported to another realm, and good ol’ fashioned wallops to the noggin’. Along with however many I exploded to get their attention in the first place, and all in a handful of minutes.

We weren’t even out of breath.

The four who remained shot nervous looks towards their Alpha, who was busy removing the owl-woman’s beak from his thigh with one hand, while parrying strikes from Ashe with the other. Ember was lighting him up with arrows as well, but he soaked the hits by using his wings to intercept, though Ember’s projectiles pierced through before halting, creating ragged holes in the leathery membranes. The Alpha’s frantic defense against the trio gave Myria openings for rapid thrusts from her rapier.

Above us, a mighty caw filled the sky, and we all looked up to see the Hammerhead diving down toward the river, completely engulfed in flame. It crashed down, sending up an enormous plume of water. Lito quickly followed, descending from the air and landing on the ship in a deep squat, smashing down through the planks until he was straddling the deck. His feet were no doubt dangling down into some startled fellow’s cabin.

Smoke drifted off of Lito and he was covered in soot, but otherwise looked completely unperturbed. He glanced around at the slaughter he'd landed amidst, and then to the four Chovali who remained.

"I've got a few questions for you all," he said, fishing in his shirt and pulling out his cigarette case.

The Chovali leapt into the air and flew off.

"That's too bad," he said, then lit the smoke with a flaming finger. He twisted to look at the fight with the Alpha, still half-buried in the deck. "Is Cole not back out here yet?"

"I haven't seen him," I said, still focused on the Alpha fight. "Should we help...or something?"

The owl-creature had the Alpha in a full-nelson and was biting at his neck, while the Chovali leader opened his mouth and shot out a blast of force, knocking Ashe and Ember off their feet. Myria darted in for another thrust, then stepped back and put a hand on her chin like a painter considering her work.

"Help? No. They're stringing the Alpha along, letting him wear himself out. Cole would have helped that go a bit faster, though."

"Trying to keep him alive?" I said.

He pointed at me.

"You got it. He wouldn't answer my questions earlier, but maybe he'll change his mind."

Lito began yanking himself from the floor, and I continued to watch the four-versus-one fight. Nuralie stepped up next to me and watched as well while Lito went to find Cole.

"What was that chant for?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh, when I beseeched the gods of blowing shit up? I was just trying to make it obvious who was casting the *Explosion!* spell. There's also just something about the spell that makes me want to monologue while I charge it."

"Oh. That makes sense." Pause. "It was kind of a stupid chant, though."

I sighed melodramatically.

"Guess I wasted my time at all those improv classes."

Nuralie ran a hand over her blonde strip of hair and nodded thoughtfully.

The owl finally got a good chunk of the Alpha's trapezius and tossed its head back to slurp it down.

"Is it weird that watching this makes me kind of hungry?" I said. "I know we ate like an hour ago, but still."

"No. I want more of that meat from dinner."

"Maybe we should go check on that bird in the river. Make sure it's dead."

"Yes." Pause. "It's already half cooked."

"Have you *had* Hammerhead before?" I asked.

"No. But it's supposed to be good."

"Well, there's a shit ton of it out there. Waste not, want not, right?"

"Indeed."

We continued to watch the fight for a little while longer.

"BATS!"

"DELICIOUS!"