

“Were you just... watching that whole time?” I asked.

Yaretzi pulled himself up and over the railing, then surveyed the body of the Speed Delver. Etja had begun bombarding the northern caravel and its shield was beginning to fail.

“Yaretzi did not see you kill this one,” he said, nudging the body with a boot. “Yaretzi came back up when you struck Lintiel.” He gestured at the archer.

“Why not help them?”

“Yaretzi needed to see what you could do.” He shrugged. “Tavio believes that he can make the climb up to Platinum if he were only a bit stronger. That is why he wishes to know your secrets. Yaretzi finds that idea intriguing, so this one does not want to accidentally kill you before finding out what your trick is.”

“What does that have to do with these boats?” I asked. “Did you come out here just to wait for me to show up?”

His face was obscured by his helm, but his body language showed puzzlement.

“What? No. This is a happy coincidence. Yaretzi was sent to the blockade to test these weapons.” He pointed at the broken spike gun on the bow of the ship. “The copper ships are... not ready for deployment. The silvers show more promise, though.”

“You tested them on your own people,” I said, voice low.

He waved a hand dismissively.

“It was pointed at *you*,” he said. “Yaretzi will not be in any trouble.”

“Then it doesn’t bother you to kill your allies?”

“Allies?” said Yaretzi. “Those soldiers were not Yaretzi’s allies. How could they be, as weak as they are?”

“Aren’t you a member of the Navy? That doesn’t make them your comrades?”

Yaretzi sighed.

“When Yaretzi reached level 10 the Empire bestowed upon him the rank of Captain. It is a great honor, but it is not an honor that Yaretzi wished for.” He rolled a hand in the air. “This is all an obligation. Yaretzi does not care for it. Yaretzi would never say this to the

duchess, but if Yaretzi could break free of the Empire, Yaretzi would.” He paused and flicked his wrist, a saber appearing in his grip. He locked eyes with me, and I could just make out his dark brown irises beneath the helm. They glowed with eerie light. “You must not tell anyone, but this is not the first time that Yaretzi has killed Imperial soldiers because it was convenient to do so.”

As I realized the depth of Yaretzi’s psychopathy, I received a notification.

You have observed the Intimacy spell!

Intimacy

Divine

Cost: None

Requirements: CHA 20, Divine 20

Effects:

Choose one character you can perceive other than yourself and reveal to them something they don’t already know that is personal to you.

You receive a number of stacks of Blessed based on how vulnerable the information makes you and by how much it affects their opinion of you, good or bad. You receive a minimum of one stack and up to a maximum number of stacks equal to your CHA.

Blessed: You may expend any number of stacks of Blessed to increase your damage or defenses by 7 for each stack spent for one attack.

Yaretzi dashed forward, saber slashing through the air. I brought up Gracovus and barely intercepted the strike, but he twisted his arm and the blade slid down off the front of the shield. He ducked low and brought it up beneath my guard, stabbing me between the plates of my armor in my armpit.

Critical damage reduced by 40%!

Bleeding negated!

HP: 1178 -> 1079

Weakness: 25%

You have been affected by Blade of Censure! You lose mana equal to half of the damage Yaretzi dealt.

Mana: 289 -> 240

The damage wasn't anything special. The Weakness debuff and the hit to my mana were the real threats. I leaped back and threw Somnres, copying it into a triple Void Hammer and arcing it to one side to take Yaretzi from his right. I immediately followed up with another series aimed head-on.

Yaretzi tumbled forward and dodged the first volley, then cast a Dispel on the second, and one of the copied hammers disappeared. He turned the next hammer aside with his blade. The final attack landed, but Yaretzi's body glowed with divine light and the strike bounced off. Oblivion Orb activated, but the spell was consumed by the fighter's defensive buff, which meant the man was spending an unreasonable number of Blessed stacks.

He rushed me again and I cast Shortcut to appear behind him. I swung with Somnres, lengthening it into a one-handed war hammer, but the man ducked aside without even looking behind him. He bent over backward and thrust his blade at my arm with two quick jabs. The strikes landed in my elbow and my shoulder.

Critical damage reduced by 40%!

Body of Theseus has prevented 40% of the effects of a debilitating injury!

Bleeding negated!

HP: 1079 -> 1027

HP: 1027 -> 970

The tendons in my elbow were cut, and I was surprised to find that I held on to my hammer through the benefits Body of Theseus gave me. While the evolution's description made me suspect that I was being transformed into some sort of homogenous flesh creature, I hadn't realized that it meant my body was less reliant on discrete physiological structures like the tendons that attached muscle to bone. Disturbing in a way, but helpful.

[Aren't you supposed to be on a boat today?!] Grotto thought to me. *[Why are you taking so much damage? Are you trying to wrestle predatory fish?!]*

[Ran into a friend of Tavio's,] I quickly thought back.

Yaretzi twisted his body to face me and prepared to deliver another series of thrusts, but my adversary had forgotten about something. My first volley of hammers had been thrown with Homing Weapon. The copies that Somnres created were Fleeting, which meant that they disappeared once they *struck* something. Yaretzi had *dodged* the hammers, so they hadn't hit anything, and were now hurtling back towards me in an attempt to return to my hand.

I cast Shortcut to appear on Yaretzi's right, placing him directly in the path of the two copied hammers flying back to me. I fainted with a hammer strike, shortening Somnres since I was only a foot away from the Littan, and he swept the attack aside with his saber. He followed up with a quick thrust to my exposed face and his blade pierced through my cheek, destroying several molars in the process.

Critical damage reduced by 40%!

Bleeding negated!

HP: 970 -> 856

You have been affected by Blade of Censure! You lose mana equal to half of the damage Yaretzi dealt.

Mana: 198 -> 121

I jerked my head to the side as the attack landed, keeping the blade from sliding through my mouth and throat and out the back of my skull. Yaretzi flicked the blade, slicing my right cheek entirely open, but I dismissed Somnres and grabbed the man's wrist in response. A rapier appeared in his offhand and he readied himself to drive it into my gut when his eyes went wide. He twisted his head in the split second before the two hammers returning to me crashed into him, his body becoming engulfed in divine light.

Both copies slammed into his back, the kinetic force and dimensional damage being consumed by his Blessed stacks, but his buffs faltered on the second hit. The second Oblivion Orb went off and runes along his armor flared to life as whatever enhancements they possessed were forced to tank the damage. He stumbled forward into me, snarling and trying to rip his arm free. That's when I realized that Yaretzi didn't have a very high Strength score.

I tightened my grip and cast Oblivion Orb the old-fashioned way—in the palm of my hand. Yaretzi's armor lit up again, some of the runes failing and venting mana along his arm. He shrieked and brought his rapier across my knuckles, severing two of my fingers and yanking his hand free.

HP: 856 -> 817

The mail around his wrist was gone, the edges cut clean through by Oblivion Orb. While the flesh below had not also been cast into another plane of existence, the fur was gone and the skin was deeply bruised and dripping blood.

Yaretzi stepped back and his saber disappeared as he tucked the wounded limb close to his chest. I looked down at my hand, seeing that my pinky and ring finger were no longer there. Curiously, I could see blood crawling along the edge of the wound, but none of it spilled out. The vital fluid exited the little arteries in my fingers, found that it had nowhere to go, then wormed its way back into a vein to return to my heart. I still had blood, it just knew where it was supposed to be at all times.

I summoned Somnres and gave it a couple of test swings. My grip wasn't as stable, but I could still use the weapon. It just hurt like shit to do so. I spat out shards of my teeth and smiled at Yaretzi, the expression excruciating and lopsided since my left cheek was destroyed.

"Tavio was tougher," I said.

I spotted caution entering Yaretzi's eyes beneath his helm as he reconsidered how much of a threat I was. While we'd both taken hits to our dominant hands, mine was still useable whereas his was limp and unmoving.

I'd never landed an Oblivion Orb on a higher-level Delver before but I'd harbored suspicions about how it might work. The spell had failed against mana-dense objects in the past—mana-woven armor and magically reinforced doors—and a Delver's body was crammed full of the stuff.

The common wisdom was that Fortitude was the primary defense against Dimensional damage, but it looked like that resistance didn't stop Oblivion Orb from penetrating, it just reduced the amount of substance that it was able to remove from reality. Between Yaretzi's enchanted armor and whatever his Fortitude was, he had managed to keep his wrist, but the deep bruise, oozing blood, and unmoving fingers told me that the damage went through the muscle, bone, and tendon beneath. A million tiny holes, instead of one big one.

How well would Yaretzi's *heart* work with damage like that?

Also, where the fuck was Etja?

I was positioned on the north side of the caravel, looking southward at Yaretzi who was doing some sort of mental calculus in his head about our fight. The caravel Etja had been engaging was behind me and I didn't dare take my eyes off of my opponent. While I didn't hear the sounds of battle, I did hear voices that carried well over the water.

"Please!" a man shouted in heavily accented Hiwardian. "He threatened our families! He's insane!"

“Okay, calm down,” said Etja. “Are you saying that... you won’t shoot at us anymore?”

“We won’t!” said a woman hastily. “But you have to kill him! Everyone who’s even *thought* about reporting him disappears!”

Yaretzi sighed.

“Yaretzi does not like how this is going,” he said.

“I bet.”

Yaretzi brought up his rapier in his offhand and held it up in front of his face, then gave me a duelist’s bow.

“Yaretzi will no longer try to capture you.”

“Thanks, but I don’t buy that for a second,” I said.

“Yaretzi will now kill you instead.”

“Ah, that makes more sense.”

Yaretzi’s torso shone with sparkling light and I was hit with a debuff.

Lockstep

You and Yaretzi may only move away from one another.

I squinted at the debuff and tried to take a step toward the man, but my feet wouldn’t budge. I took a step to the left, which put a little more distance between myself and Yaretzi, but couldn’t step back to the right.

“Fun trick,” I said as Yaretzi took two big steps away from me and came to a stop next to one of the boat’s side-mounted cannons.

He kicked the cannon’s mount and several bolts came loose. The cannon rotated around toward me and came to a stop aimed directly at my chest. There was no magic involved, no spell or technique used from what I could see. It was as though the cannon’s mount had been built with a specific, intentional flaw for this exact situation.

“Are you built into fucking *Luck*?!” I said, scrambling to adjust Somnres into a throwing hammer shape, but I was too slow.

Yaretzi gave the cannon another kick and it fired. A mana-woven, dark iron cannonball hit me in the chest at about 700 miles per hour.

It sucked.

The force jettisoned me backward and I crashed through a mast, then bounced off of the boat’s quarterdeck and smashed the railing on the stern. I was thrown out across the sea, tumbling end over end through the air. While the world rotated around me my eyes caught sight of something on the distant shore that momentarily broke through the shock of my sudden, acute injuries.

There was a monstrous soul presence rising up over the coastline and visible even from a mile away. It was as potent as any soul I’d ever beheld, but there were no Delver levels surrounding it. There was something else imbued within it, a presence that hinted at unknowable depths as the soul substance churned like a storm-swept sea.

I splashed down into the cold water and lost sight of whatever it was. For several seconds I couldn’t move as my mind and body processed the traumatic damage I’d just sustained and I sank into the dark abyss.

Critical damage reduced by 40%!

Bleeding negated!

HP: 817 -> 605

My ribs were gravel, my lungs were collapsed, and the front of my plate armor was bent inward to the point where it was crushing me. The pain was blinding and I was disoriented, unable to tell which way was up or down in the water. After several seconds of battling against the agony in my chest I finally managed to begin making a feeble effort at swimming—that is to say, I used Gracovus to float me in a few different directions. I figured out which way was up by figuring out the direction that I *couldn’t* ‘swim’, which was in the direction of Yaretzi who was above me in the caravel. It was exactly what had happened to Varrin.

I tore at the straps of my chest armor and ripped it away, then tossed it into my inventory. The fact that I could perform any functions with my arms that required the use of my pecs was likely due to Body of Theseus. The ribs that anchored those muscles were in a hundred little pieces, after all, and the movements were slow and difficult. I took a moment to think through my next course of action as my empty lungs began to burn. That particular discomfort was a drop in the bucket while said metaphorical bucket sank deeper into an ocean of hurt, so it was easy enough to ignore.

[The feedback from our Shared Fate connection has now caused me to ruin three separate weaves that I was working on.]

[A tragedy, to be sure. Feel like helping out?]

[If the alternative is that you suffer a miserable demise, then I suppose it is in my interest that I assist.]

[Alright, get ready to think real hard at an asshole.]

I used Gracovus to keep myself from sinking any further and tested using Shortcut to get closer to the surface. The teleport was successful, unrestricted by the Lockstep debuff, but I kept myself a few feet under the water while I considered. I looked at the debuff again, but there was no hint as to how long it would last.

I was below half on health and had a third of my mana left. I had no idea how much damage I'd done to Yaretzi. Certainly a lot less than he'd done to me, but my allies would be moving in soon. I needed to be sure I was there to keep Yaretzi from quickly cutting apart my less tanky party members, but I also wanted to make sure I had a good counter to this ability. If anything, Lockstep was just as much of a detriment to Yaretzi as it was to me, although the Littan likely had a lot more experience dealing with its downsides.

If Yaretzi couldn't *move* toward me, what would happen if I *pulled* him toward me?

I decided that was something I'd like to find out.