

I cast Shortcut again to appear a hundred feet above sea level, scoping out the aquatic battlefield before me while standing on Gracorvus. I felt a tug at the back of my mind to turn and study the massive soul presence I'd seen, but I ignored it. There were more immediate problems than some distant demigod, avatar, or outrageously leveled Delver. Whatever it was, it was firmly within Eschen territory. I doubted it was Littan.

I also resisted the temptation to get tunnel vision on Yaretzi, choosing to take a few seconds to let my ribs begin to fuse back together while I scanned the fleet. The psychopath had mentioned the existence of Silver-grade Delver boats like the Copper caravels we'd just wrecked, and I didn't want any sneaking up on us.

I didn't spot any more encroaching caravels, but that didn't mean a whole lot. I couldn't use my See ability on the whole ocean at once, so unless I knew generally where to look for them they could still be out there. What I *did* spot was the entire Littan blockade fleet regrouping and sailing our way.

"Fallback flag my ass," I muttered before turning back to Yaretzi.

The number one asshole in my life was currently sailing his caravel out of a cloud of poison while holding a cloth over the slit in his frog helm. Without a crew, it should have been impossible for the man to manage the craft alone. And yet, he did. The boat was moving quite fast as well. I added "magic sailor" to my mental model of Yaretzi's build.

I was glad to know that Nuralie was still in the fight, but still had no idea where she was, exactly. I checked her status in my party interface and saw that she was close to full on health, so it didn't look like Yaretzi had done any damage to her while I was taking a bath.

While Yaretzi cleared his deck of the toxic mist, Etja launched off the northern caravel and began raining death rays down onto him. Her beams carved across the deck while the Littan danced between them, his body moving and contorting in inhuman ways. He made it to one of the cannons and raised a hand toward Etja, the familiar blue mana of a Dispel dancing along his fingers. I was pretty far away but hadn't ever had a problem with the range of my own Dispel before, so I decided to counter his counterspell. I shakily raised my hand and focused on his mana, activating the skill with all the righteous fury of a mono-blue player at Friday Night Magic.

It didn't work.

Dispel negated by Absolute Authority

You cannot counter, dispel, or negate any of Yaretzi's skills unless your relevant skill level is equal to or higher than Yaretzi's Mystical Magic skill.

I tried to let out a frustrated grunt when I saw the message, but it came out more as a gurgle that sent me into an excruciating coughing fit. Yaretzi's ability countered spells trying to counter his counterspells. I fucking hated this guy.

To soothe my irritation, I mana-shaped the Pocket Closet portal and unleashed Grotto into the world. He swept out in all his feathered and octopoid glory.

[Direct me to the insolent fiends and I will wreak havoc upon their minds!]

While I was focused on the Closet, Yaretzi cast his Dispel, Etja's beam fizzled, and he fired his cannon just as I finished opening the portal. My first instinct was to Shortcut between Etja and the projectile, but that was a very precise teleport and I also knew that Etja had plenty of defensive abilities of her own. I couldn't afford to soak another 200 damage right now. I needed to do a little setup to make sure Yaretzi found his way into a watery grave. He was too dangerous and the risk that he would pursue the party after this fight was too high. Unless escape was the only viable option, I would do everything in my power to end him.

The cannon shot was lined up perfectly, but Etja used a powerful burst of Siphon to shunt the projectile aside. Yaretzi cartwheeled to the next cannon and began aiming it, but Etja adjusted her tactics and began cutting through the weapons aboard the Littan's caravel. Unlike Yaretzi himself, the hunks of dark iron couldn't dodge.

[He is very acrobatic.]

[Think you can disrupt some of that?]

[His level is substantial, but my experience with the specter has given me a few ideas.]

[Alright, help the others hold out while I get a combo going.]

[Very well.] He floated away toward the fight at speed.

I summoned Somnres and swung it in the air before me, testing my grip and strength. It was barely manageable with the state of my ribs, but I didn't need to be able to chuck the hammer full force. I just needed to get it going. The skill that Sam'lia helped me to learn would do the rest.

I activated Gravity Anchor.

Gravity Anchor

Dimensional / Physical

Cost: Variable stamina per second

Requirements: FOR 40, INT 20, Dimensional 20, Physical 10

Effects:

Vastly increase your gravitational pull. While Gravity Anchor is active, the core of your body may not be moved by any physical means. The strength of this gravitational pull is based on your Physical skill level and the amount of stamina channeled into this ability.

You may also warp the directional flow of the gravitational pull by spending additional stamina, so long as the endpoint for the adjusted flow is the core of your body. Your control over this secondary effect is determined by your Dimensional skill level and your Intelligence.

The technique was based on Etja's Siphon ability, but Sam'lia had helped me to reforge the base skill into something that better suited me. We added restrictions to make it less versatile but more potent while adjusting the mana flow so that it centered on my body and could utilize stamina rather than mana. I couldn't command objects to fly or blast my opponents into the ground at range or manipulate myself to fly. I had none of the nuance that Etja had. I could command gravity to do one thing, and that was to make the world fall toward me.

After all, having everyone and everything around become irresistibly attracted to the density of my masculine presence was a very Arlo thing to do.

The sea spray in the air whipped around me and I felt moisture beginning to gather on my skin. My ears popped as the air pressure rose. My leggings and the armor I was still wearing hugged me more tightly. My shirt had been shredded and entangled by my warped breastplate and had come off when I removed the armor. I was glad that my chest was once again properly exposed, as gruesome a sight as it was. The weight of my cuirass pressing into my broken chest would have been less than pleasant.

I threw Somnres and made two Void Hammer copies. I used Hammerang to manipulate the weapon into a tight arc and the copies began to spiral around me. It had taken a lot of trial and error to get this trick right, but the main struggle had been a physical one. My Coordinated Thinker evolution for Intelligence gave me an enhanced grasp of spatial and dimensional concepts, so intuitively calculating orbital trajectories wasn't a big deal. I just had to build up muscle memory until I possessed the skill to throw the damn hammers at the right angle.

I summoned Somnres back to me and made sure the two spectral copies that were orbiting me were stable. In the distance, Yaretzi had summoned a billowing cloak on his back and it spread out like wings. He darted up into the air to meet Etja, rapier glinting in his offhand. At first, Etja was quicker, but Yaretzi shot forward with a sudden burst of speed and he thrust his blade at Etja's joints. The mage's body shone as her Mana Barrier shunted some of the damage to her mana pool, but with Yaretzi's Blade of Censure ability that let him drain mana, I knew that Etja couldn't last long.

Grotto drew closer to the fight and Yaretzi's head jerked back and his helm glowed as the mini-c'thon hit him with a psychic attack. The Littan froze in place for a moment, and an arrow appeared between Yaretzi's shoulder blades. I finally spotted Nuralie on the deck of the caravel Yaretzi had just left. It was listing heavily, slowly sinking from the damage caused by Etja's beams, but Nuralie balanced on the uneven surface and lined up another series of shots.

While the four fought, I threw two more sets of Void Hammers into my orbit, giving me six hammers rotating around me. My chest screamed with every throw, slowing my progress, but I wanted *more*. I threw another set, making sure that each pair was orbiting at a slightly different range. The combo was a huge drain on both mana and stamina, but I wasn't planning on needing to repeat this trick. I threw again.

Yaretzi maneuvered around Etja, placing her between himself and Nuralie. He thrust his rapier into her back and Etja's Mana Barrier failed as his attack exhausted the rest of her mana. The former golem fell toward the sea, unable to maintain Siphon to keep herself afloat. Her health was low, but she was alive.

Yaretzi's helm glowed again, making space for Nuralie to land another arrow. The Littan shot toward Grotto, but my familiar was even nimbler than Etja in the air. The Delve Core led Yaretzi on a merry chase through the sky. Eventually, the Littan threw a pair of daggers at Grotto, causing my familiar to back off a bit further. Etja had splashed down into the ocean and was beginning to sink.

[Grotto, are you strong enough to lift Etja?]

[*How feeble do you believe me to be?*] he thought back, already descending toward the sinking mage.

Yaretzi spun and rushed down toward the ship as Nuralie turned to dive off, but the Littan activated an ability that kept the loson from fleeing. Nuralie's eyes opened wide in alarm as she was caught in the grip of Lockstep. Instead of restricting the pair of combatants to only moving *away* from one another, they could now only move *toward* one another.

Yaretzi just fucked up.

While I couldn't travel through space normally while Gravity Anchor was active, I *could* teleport. I cast Shortcut to adjust my position so that I was a hundred feet behind Yaretzi as he dove. After a two-second pause, I cast Shortcut again and appeared beside Nuralie, on the opposite side of Yaretzi from where I'd just been. The Littan came to an abrupt halt as though he'd collided with an invisible wall made of sticky traps. The kind they use to catch mice in attics.

Yaretzi could only move *away* from me, but he could also only move *toward* Nuralie. Since she and I were standing side by side, there was nowhere for the Littan to go.

Nuralie let out a yelp as she was sucked into my side by my gravity well, but I was able to use the technique's secondary effect to adjust the pull to flow around her, giving her some relief from the pressure. It took a lot of concentration and upped the stamina drain substantially, but I only wanted to make one person a pancake today.

"Don't move," I said to her, but I kept my eyes on Yaretzi.

"What is this?!" Yaretzi yelled as I kicked the gravity up another notch, dumping more stamina into the ability. I was down to a quarter of my reserves.

The Littan's body contorted as an immense pressure pulled him toward me while his own ability forced him to stay in place and endure it. His limbs dangled and his mail armor billowed and clinked. Metal ringlets began to come loose from where I'd severed it with Oblivion Orb. They smacked into my wet skin and stuck to me alongside drops of blood from the Littan's bruised and bloody wrist.

The caravel was no longer sinking, held aloft by my pull. The boards of the boat below creaked and groaned, then began to splinter and break. The ocean rose over the sides of the ship and began to gather and swirl around Nuralie and me. Pretty soon I would have to start holding my breath.

But that was only the opener.

My hammers did not travel with me when I teleported. That was a problem I was working on, but it was also an advantage I could manipulate. All ten of my copied hammers had been thrown with Homing Weapon and all ten were currently trying to make their way back to me. My first teleport had been made to pull them into an angle of approach from Yaretzi's rear, while my second teleport put him directly in their path.

Ten Void Hammers rushed at Yaretzi's back in a chaotic spiral of varying arcs. Their orbits had been disrupted by the sudden absence of anything to orbit and Homing Weapon demanded that they return to me, causing the copied weapons to crisscross and approach like a cluster of hastily fired missiles from five different launchers.

Yaretzi's eyes narrowed and he struggled to twist his head to look behind him, but he couldn't crane his neck under the force of my pull. He had something that alerted him to attacks that he couldn't see coming. He'd used it the first time I pulled this trick. Yaretzi couldn't move to avoid the incoming disaster. Instead, he made a confession.

"I donate half my salary to a wounded children's fund!" He screamed in a rush of words.

I barely had time to register his statement, which must have been true because his body glowed with fresh stacks of Blessed. The moment before the hammers impacted he also activated a skill.

Funhouse Mirror

So long as you are facing Yaretzi, you only deal half damage with your attacks. So long as you are facing away from Yaretzi, you deal double damage. This effect also applies to Yaretzi when attacking you.

Before I could process the debuff and adjust, the hammers came down on Yaretzi in a storm. His immobilized form was battered by Somnres copies that activated bowling ball-sized Oblivion Orbs on contact. Yaretzi's body glowed with holy light as he struggled to absorb the damage with his Blessed stacks while his Funhouse ability halved everything that was incoming.

Not all of the hammers landed. A few smashed into the deck of the ship and swallowed large holes out of the already broken and distressed vessel. A couple whipped past Yaretzi and I hastily caught them, then did my best to throw them back, but the strength was shit from my destroyed chest and the force of my gravity working against me. Still,

the throws weren't enough for the hammer to do much kinetic damage, but the Oblivion Orb charges activated.

The last three pierced all of Yaretzi's defenses and the runes on his armor exploded. Large circles of the armor were cut away, revealing scoured, bruised and bleeding flesh beneath. One wound on his abdomen had been stripped of its skin completely, and I could see a bit of intestine trying to worm its way out. Blood rained down onto me, mixing with the seawater that swirled and churned around my midsection.

Before I could savor the victory, Yaretzi produced the biggest fucking crossbow I'd ever seen from his inventory.

He could barely hold it. His left arm dangled toward me as his body was still locked in place by his own ability while being sucked in by my skill. The weapon was so long that it ended less than a foot from my chest. It was already loaded and primed.

I considered using Shortcut to escape, but Nuralie had slipped directly behind me. I could drop Gravity Anchor and kick her off the boat, but she was still affected by Lockstep and there was no time. Yaretzi was mortally wounded and, unless he got some sort of treatment, he would certainly bleed out. No. I wanted to keep him locked down. I decided to eat it.

"Come on!" I screamed. "Think it'll be enough?!"

He fired. The bolt hit me in the chest. It pierced my heart.