

Like any good member of the well-to-do, one of my most reliable methods for solving difficult problems was to throw money at it.

Back in the Creation Delve, our party had stumbled across an immense field of poison essences that we happily stuffed our pockets with. The only thing that stopped us from taking more essences than we had was the size of said pockets. At that time, my inventory had yet to become the self-perpetuating growth machine of the Closet, so I was limited to a *paltry* sum of slightly less than a thousand essences. The essences had a wide array of crafting uses and I currently sold them to Seinnador at a rate of 32 golden notes a piece.

For reference, a ruby chip could be exchanged for 50 golden notes, which made each essence worth a chunky bit more than half of a ruby chip. That much money would have allowed a peasant family to live comfortably for a year or more.

I still had 570 of them.

The egg-sized crystals naturally emitted a toxic vapor. It wasn't very potent on its own, so it was much more efficient to transform an essence into the poison one desired if the goal was to stack Toxicity as fast as possible. A crafter could convert essences and poison essence could be transformed into any type of poison that the crafter was familiar with, although there was a limit based on their crafting skill.

Nuralie's Alchemy skill was well-developed and allowed her to make some pretty vicious poisons from the essences. My contract with Seinnador had been formed before I met the scaled alchemist, else I would have saved all of the essences for her use. Despite selling Seinnador all of his requirements for poison essences, Nuralie was still my number 1 consumer of the deadly nuggets. Seinnador was a generalist after all. Nuralie was a death-brewin' specialist.

Thus, it was with both great financial pain and schadenfreude-filled delight that I emptied our entire backup stock of Nuralie's poisons right onto The Pit's stupid face.

I dropped everything from highly refined nerve gas to experimental hemotoxins. I threw vials of rapid-release metabolic suppressants and long-lasting hepatotoxins. I even tossed out a failed batch of phototoxin, which did little more than give the victim a vicious sun allergy and probably an increased risk of skin cancer. I threw in a liter of undiluted genitotoxin for good measure, which was a key ingredient in a contraceptive that Nuralie sold. At this concentration, it would lead to less of a temporary sterilization and more of a permanent *melting* of the sensitive areas. No idea if The Pit had those, but I wasn't holding anything back. No one wanted this thing reproducing anyway.

An alluring display of baneful colors exploded on The Pit's surface. A carpet bombing of violet clouds, slicks of bubbling green, and bright red detonations that sent venom-laced razors into the beast. Nature's toxic hues encompassed the entire rainbow.

Despite the indiscriminate bombardment, Grotto's characterization of our attacks being insect bites to the monster was an apt one. The poisons landed like pinpricks along the remnant's head and body, covering only a sliver of its total surface area. Although I did land one acidic necrotoxin in its giant fucking eye, which was supremely satisfying. However, when it came to poison, we didn't need to take *big* bites. The venomous chomp of a snake could be deadly, but its fangs only left a small mark.

I dumped enough toxic waste to give an EPA agent a heart attack, but I got it done in a flash. Many of the poisons were held in potion belts that were quickly emptied. The ones that held the vials more securely got tossed, belt and all—terminal velocity would be enough to shatter the ampoules and distribute their payloads.

Sadly, some of the poisons were in a few of our meticulously assembled go-bags. I didn't have time to hunt for bottles full of concentrated opiates in our emergency triage kits, or flasks of stone-melting solvent in our MacGyver duffels, so everything got dumped. Between the assault on the Littan operating base and my liberal dispensation, we were going to be in need of a materials resupply and a few weeks with Nuralie in mass production mode.

I soon ran dry of Nuralie's products, but I wasn't finished. As I said, essences could be converted by a crafter, limited by their familiarity and skill level. In fact, Convert Essence was a fundamental ability for *any* crafting skill that utilized mana weaving, which was practically all of them since essences were a key component for many weaves. This included crafting skills such as Smithing.

My personal familiarity with poisons was unusually high for a smith. Not only had I observed Nuralie's work on many occasions, but the loson's alchemical innovation often required test subjects. This was sometimes accomplished with the 'cooperation' of mana monsters while we Delved, but field testing involved a lot of unpredictable variables that made for results that were less than clinical. So, much of our testing occurred outside of Delves and since we were an ethical group of Delvers, our test subjects were uniformly volunteers. One volunteer, really. A proper test subject for poison needed to have a robust tolerance for Toxicity, which meant either a high Fortitude, a strong poison resistance, or both.

I had both.

I was the test subject.

My Smithing skill had reached level 16 during my armor-making spree, which was a far cry from Nuralie's 32 in Alchemy. Even though I was familiar with many poisons, what I could produce by converting essences was nowhere near as strong as what the loson made, especially after she processed the raw toxic materials into a proper potion. But I wasn't going for potency, I was going for *variety*.

There were a handful of poisons that Nuralie had shown (tested on) me, and that we were currently out of. These were some of the more exotic ingredients Nuralie had used to theory craft, but which hadn't shown substantially usable results. I couldn't produce the complex brews that Nuralie made, but I *could* generate the base compounds. One of the more interesting of these was a tranquilizer with psychotropic properties.

The poison induced visual and auditory hallucinations, confusion, and the sudden onset desire for a nap—all decent effects for a control-type poison. It *also* instilled a sensation of well-being so profound the target became immune to Fear, Berserk, and Paranoia. This was accompanied by a level of pain tolerance that could only be described as “absolute”, allowing the subject to continue fighting through injuries that would have otherwise incapacitated them.

In high doses the negative effects reduced the subject to a drooling puddle of drowsy dissociation, experiencing a level of disconnection from reality only achieved by the most dedicated of tie-dye-clad Grateful Dead enthusiasts. Enough of the stuff would even cause one's nervous system to call it quits, leading them to a sleepy asphyxiation.

In low doses it caused monsters to become bliss-fueled killers immune to pain.

The line between these two was thin, and the results of its testing were too erratic to distill into a viable mixture that was an efficient use of our essences and other expensive ingredients. I also stopped ‘volunteering’ for the tests after hallucinating that I was a mighty oak tree with a vendetta against bicyclists and lived out the entirety of its murderous, two-hundred-year existence in one afternoon.

I wasn't trying to be efficient, and the opportunity to witness an entire mountain tripping its—soon to be inert—balls off was too enticing to pass up.

I started pulling out fistfuls of essences and converting them.

One might find this decision questionable. Totally understandable, but The Pit hadn't responded to any of our attacks in a way that indicated it even felt pain. Fear was useless because it made things run away and it was a fucking mountain in the middle of an ocean. Berserk and Paranoia made things attack their allies or lose the benefit of party buffs and it was a *lone* fucking mountain in the middle of an ocean. Giving it

hallucinations, potentially causing it to become violent and erratic didn't matter because it was a lone fucking mountain in the middle of an ocean *that was already trying to kill us*. I stood by my decision.

There was also another good reason to add more poisons to the mix beyond a childish desire to get a mountain wasted: Nuralie's build.

Nuralie was a sustain fighter. While her combat focus was to strike unaware targets from stealth—a typical bursty rogue tactic—her archery skills did not otherwise focus on fast, hard-hitting damage. Hunger Shot did a decent chunk of damage all at once, but it required a long charge-up time. She didn't have much that could quickly deal out a lot of hurt in a short amount of time.

Instead, she used very little stamina or mana and could keep attacking so long as she had arrows and alchemical products to burn. While she could rely on her archery for most fights, she had ample damage over time for the longer ones—damage over time that stacked. Our party was almost always able to trample over whatever we were fighting before this damage ramp came online, but this encounter was different. We weren't going to be able to blitz The Pit with quick, powerful hits. We needed scaling.

At the outset, Nuralie made *stronger* poisons from her Agility 20 evolution:

Keen Hands: When crafting, products that require dexterous manipulation to produce are X% more effective, where X is your AGL (current increase: 40%).

She also applied *more* Toxicity when poisoning a target from her Physical 10 evolution:

Rot: When applying physical Toxicity to a target, increase the amount applied by 1 for each level of Physical Magic (current bonus: 12).

But the first lynchpin ability Nuralie brought to the table for scaling was her Alchemy 20 evolution.

Stacking DoTs: Whenever you apply Toxicity with a poison, the total Toxicity on the target increases by 1% for every different poison currently affecting them.

Finally, there was the *pièce de résistance*, an active skill she almost never got to use:

Venomous Escalation

Physical / Spiritual

Cost: 10 mana

Cooldown: 1 hour

Make a Physical (AGI) or Spiritual (INT) attack against a target. If successful, double the Toxicity from the chosen school on a target. This affects all statuses which include the keyword Toxicity.

So, my little display probably didn't accomplish much in the way of adding actual stacks of Toxicity—especially in proportion to the sheer number of resources I used. I wasn't an alchemist, didn't have any bonuses like Nuralie, and was relying on the poison being absorbed through the remnant's skin rather than delivering it directly into the bloodstream with a penetrating weapon. Maybe a little would get sucked in through its mouth but I wasn't sure that it even needed to breathe.

What my assault *did* accomplish was applying a shit ton of unique poisons to The Pit. Now, each time Nuralie poisoned the remnant, it compounded the stacks of Toxicity on it. I had no idea how many stacks it would take to kill it, but Etja and I were on the job of providing a healthy distraction.

With my inventory cleared of anything worthy of having the phone number for poison control listed on its label, Etja and I continued to dive toward The Pit's enormous visage.

We laced our way between tendrils, taking the occasional pustule explosion and glancing blow from the whipping towers. Etja maneuvered me between herself and The Pit's careening limbs, allowing me to serve as a meat shield. She shunted me from side to side fast enough that I could barely focus on anything other than blocking. She thrust me in the path of meaty hits and fiery explosions with so little hesitation, I briefly

wondered whether I'd done anything to make her mad lately. It was the smart strategy and I was serving my main role in the party of soaking hits, so it wasn't a real concern. Still, after she shunted me headfirst into the fifth jet of flame and shrapnel, I started to worry.

HP: 1184 -> 948

"I can block better if I'm using my shield!" I thought to her. *"Not my face!"*

"Doing a lot here!" she replied, tearing us to one side of a tendril with enough G-force that the edges of my vision darkened. *"I'm doing my best!"*

I brought up Gracovus to fend off another explosion. The hair on my head was starting to go the way of my beard.

HP: 948 -> 930

Etja's body flashed blue as she soaked the damage with her mana shield. The splash damage I couldn't block was enough that she'd been forced to use it several times. I glanced up at her bars, finding her health just above half and mana down to one-third. Her body pulsed as she spent her Fast Recharge ability for the day, getting her mana back up to 60%. She couldn't sustain this level of abuse for too much longer, even though we were dodging three-fourths of what The Pit sent our way.

Fortunately, the limbs grew thicker as we descended and moved much slower than the thrashing tips. More and more of the attacks missed, and we finally got close enough to The Pit's face that I started channeling Explosion!.

At the same time, the remnant's horrendous maw widened until it encompassed all that I could see.

Bright, orange flames filled its mouth.

A burst of fire and molten rock poured from its mouth, a stream of death too wide for us to avoid. Etja moved me in front of her, then *accelerated* towards it. I grit my teeth and held up Gracovus, widening my stance as much as I could while still protecting my

vitals behind the wide shield. Etja sailed toward the attack in a Superman stance, making herself as small as she could behind me. As the wave of fire approached, she let out a scream of defiance.

Heat became my world and I felt my skin immediately begin to blister. The rest of my hair was scoured away, filling my helm with acrid smoke. My shield rattled as globs of lava struck it. Its weight grew as the molten rock adhered and hardened on its surface and my skin was reduced to ash below my armor where it struck. My breath was ripped from my lungs as the fire consumed all, the ravenous inferno creating a brief vacuum.

HP: 930 -> 748

The storm's gale hit me with its icy winds like slamming into an iceberg as we burst through the other side of The Pit's withering breath. Etja shot us up and around the mile-long rows of monumental teeth until we hurtled toward its massive, fleshy eye, pitted and bubbling where some of the poison had landed.

Its head turned as it tried to bring its mouth back around and six limbs swung toward us, converging in an inescapable net. I readied myself to release Explosion! early, unable to see a way for us to escape without blasting one of the tendrils apart. I hadn't charged it nearly enough, but I didn't think Etja would survive the upcoming squashing. She'd avoided most of the damage from the breath weapon, but her health had still dropped below half and her mana had taken another hit as her shield offset the damage.

Seconds before we were crushed, the limbs lumbered to a halt.

The Pit stared at us, frozen in place as its monumental eye focused on me. No, not me, it focused on *Etja*. I took deep breaths, continuing to channel Explosion! while the remnant appraised us. Then, miraculously, the limbs withdrew and it turned its gaze back up toward the rest of the party who still fought its tendrils high above.

"It worked!" Etja shouted, startling me. I glanced at her, then back to the goliath that had just failed its Wisdom check.

She'd mesmerized a fucking mountain.