

Critical damage reduced by 40%!

Bleeding negated!

HP: 605 -> 381

The pain was sharp and bright. My lungs constricted and spots danced in my vision. Vertigo overwhelmed me and the only thing that kept me upright was Gravity Anchor. Each beat of my heart brought fresh torment and an extra tick of damage. I waited for death, certain that even I couldn't survive my fucking heart having a massive hole drilled in it, but I was wrong.

Body of Theseus kept the muscle going, despite the structural damage. Just a Flesh Wound kept me from bleeding out, despite the ragged hole. My absurd health pool did the rest. I glared at Yaretzi, whose look of shock was plain, even through his helm.

"No," I said. "*Not* enough."

He let the enormous crossbow go and it smashed into me, pressing the bolt further into my chest. He pulled out a fucking second one.

That's also when my stamina ran out.

Gravity Anchor ended and I crashed to the ground alongside a deluge of water, blood, broken planks, and bits of armor. The entire boat sank back down onto the ocean with a resounding splash, kicking up froth and spray. Yaretzi slumped from the impact, but caught himself with a hand, managing to stay upright. I struggled to try and sit up, but my body refused to cooperate. Having a foreign object in my heart didn't kill me, but it sure fucked with my mobility.

Nuralie immediately drew back on her bow and fired. The Littan released the crossbow and his rapier blinked into his hand as he ducked the first arrow. Nuralie fired another and Yaretzi swatted it aside drunkenly. His rapier disappeared and he pulled a knife from nowhere and then threw it at the loson. Nuralie could only dodge forward, but she chose to take the knife in her arm rather than get closer to the lethal fighter. She dropped her bow and pulled out a vial of something toxic, but hesitated, looking at my heavily wounded state.

I tried to grab the bolt in my chest and pull it out, but my arms were weak. I couldn't get them to move in the right direction. The damage to my chest was finally too much for my

evolutions to overcome. I kept taking damage as my heart shredded itself against the bolt with every beat.

HP: 298 -> 288

HP: 288 -> 278

HP: 278 -> 268

“At least I’m not bleeding,” I slurred.

Yaretzi’s lower body was painted red as he held his guts in with his useless dominant hand. He produced another knife and moved to throw it at me, but a streak of lightning struck him from behind. He halted, then turned.

The northern caravel had sailed closer to our—once again—sinking ship and the hands of the level 3 mage aboard glowed with mana. She gritted her teeth and readied another spell. The two cannoneers also drew back bows, the guns on their ship having been slagged earlier during their fight with Etja. Soon, the entire level 3 crew was lobbing attacks at Yaretzi.

The level 17 Gold watched them in confusion, the attacks bouncing off his battered armor. He swept the projectiles aside as they came.

“Yaretzi is upset,” he croaked. “Why are you attacking *Yaretzi*?!”

He heaved a knife at the mage, who went down when it struck her in the neck. The Speed-Delver aboard dragged her away and poured a potion into her mouth.

Nuralie used the opportunity to move closer to me and grip the bolt in my chest.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Do it.”

She yanked it out. I would say that it hurt, but it was the kind of hurt you write love songs about. The relief of having the thing out of me was overwhelming and I considered asking Nuralie to marry me on the spot.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she said. Pause. “Here, drink this.”

She pulled out one of her advanced healing potions and tipped it into my mouth. She did the same with a mana potion.

Nuralie's Advanced Healing Potion

+946 HP regen/hour

Nuralie's Advanced Mana Potion

+364 MP regen/hour

Total HP Regen: 1,514/hour

Total MP Regen: 429/hour

"Going to burn through all our emerald chips using the good potions so liberally," I said.

"Yes, very liberal." Pause. "You're the only one who can drink them without going into shock."

Yaretzi tossed a few more knives at the Littan Delvers, then hefted the massive crossbow and railed one of the cannons with it in the eye. The man slumped over, but the attacks of his allies had started to land. A couple of arrows stuck out of Yaretzi's torso where my orbs had removed his armor. He snarled and raised a hand into the air, then used a new technique.

Darkness flowed out from his body and filled the air, casting everything in impenetrable shadow. Even my enhanced sight couldn't see through it, barely able to perceive Nuralie right next to me. The alchemist drew out a dagger and continued to crouch by me while I activated Gracovus and held it up.

"The debuff only lasts so long," came Yaretzi's voice from the dark. It echoed all around us.

"How many fucking abilities does this guy have?" I said, growing frustrated with the asshole's bag of tricks.

“Ten, I suspect,” said Nuralie.

“Feels like more.”

A knife thudded into Gracorus.

“Any second now,” Yaretzi whispered.

The effects of Lockstep on you have ended!

Yaretzi stumbled through the dark toward us, rapier at the ready. I tried to get to my feet, but my body hadn't had time to regenerate enough. I was still crippled. Nuralie threw a vial at Yaretzi, but he swiped out of the air with his sword. The vial shattered and its contents splattered over him. His armor smoked and his skin sizzled where the liquid made contact, but he moved forward without pause.

Nuralie stepped in with her dagger and the two exchanged strikes. Yaretzi was heavily wounded, bleeding, poisoned, and had the use of only one arm, while Nuralie was still somewhat fresh. However, Yaretzi was more focused on Blades and melee combat, whereas Nuralie's dagger was a fallback. The difference in level and skill bridged the gap between their relative physical conditions and after three exchanges, Yaretzi scored a hit on Nuralie's collarbone.

Nuralie clutched at her neck and took another wild swing at Yaretzi, but the Littan parried and strode forward. I sent Gracorus to intercept as he shoved his rapier toward the loson's gut. His blade crashed off of the shield, but he slid his weapon around it and plunged it into Nuralie's abdomen regardless. I gritted my teeth, then cast Shortcut right in front of Yaretzi, between the two of them. He laughed, then stabbed me in her stead.

I tried to reach out and use Oblivion Orb, but he easily pushed my hand aside and plunged his rapier into me again.

“Yaretzi likes this much better!” he said. “Tavio will not be happy, but he will understand!” He brought the rapier up to my neck. “Would you like to tell Yaretzi how you got so strong before Yaretzi kills you?”

“Sure,” I said, barely able to keep myself from collapsing. After his last attacks, my health was only a hair above 100. “It's simple. Step 1, eat vast quantities of excrement and perish. Step 2, develop enough flexibility to perform coitus on yourself. Step 3—”

Yaretzi leaned in close and whispered in my ear.

“Is this supposed to provoke Yaretzi?”

“Feel like you’re already pretty provoked.”

“You are correct.”

“How long until you bleed to death?” I asked.

“Yaretzi has a few minutes more to speak.”

A heavy thud sounded on the deck behind Yaretzi, and I could make out a near-seven-foot frame through the gloom.

“I’m glad you’re a talker,” I said, embracing the man in a tight hug as he tried to turn around—well, more like a gentle squeeze, given the state of my arms. It caught him off guard and I pressed my weight into him, pushing him off balance.

The glint of metal cut through the darkness, and Yaretzi’s legs were cleanly severed. I collapsed down on top of the man as he let out a cry of pain. I peeked up to find Varrin standing with Kazandak at the ready, blade dripping with Littan blood.

“This is starting to become a habit of yours,” I said. “Showing up at the last second to cut somebody in half.”

“Move so I can finish him,” said Varrin. “I already had to strike at his legs because of how close you were.”

Before I could roll away, Yaretzi broke down into a fit of laughter.

“Say it!” Yaretzi shouted, and both Varrin and I looked at him in confusion. “No? Yaretzi cuts your legs, then you cut his! You should say something like... If you go for the legs, make sure to finish the job!”

I rolled away from Yaretzi and Varrin brought his sword up for the coup de grace.

Then, the world froze.

A burst of gray light emerged from Yaretzi’s chest and my allies disappeared. It rolled across the deck of the ship, and everything it touched faded to grayscale and monochrome. Yaretzi turned his head to gaze at me with his deep brown eyes.

“Yaretzi prefers that we finish this alone,” he said.

The light spread out across the sea, banishing the magical darkness and revealing a world that was frozen and immobile. I sat up and looked around, finding the sea completely still and glassy. Our now unsinking boat no longer rocked or swayed.

A bit farther out the world was ruled by a hazy, white fog. The Litten fleet had closed in, their bows creeping out from the soupy mist with cannons in striking distance but the decks were empty and the sails were still. The vessels were as frozen as the water they sailed across. The Delvers on the northern caravel were also gone. Besides myself and Yaretzi, there wasn't another living soul in sight. I looked up to find a clear sky black as night, but empty of the moon, stars, or any other celestial body.

I took a breath but found it thick and difficult. I swept my arm through the air and felt resistance, as though the gas around me were condensed somehow. I looked back to Yaretzi, who had propped himself up and was downing a pair of potions. His right wrist was broken and he was missing both legs below the knees, but I was barely any better off. For the moment...

"The fuck is this?" I asked.

"Welcome," he said, "to the Second Layer."

I sat up and scooted back until I was leaning against part of the boat's railing that was still intact. I had a notification but didn't remember being alerted to one. I eyed Yaretzi. The man had closed his eyes and was looking oddly serene, so I read over the message.

Thunderdome!

Two go in. One comes out. Yaretzi has invoked a Deific spell that has transported both of you to the Second Layer. Neither of you may leave while the other lives. If one of you is reduced to 0 HP, the survivor will be returned to the origin point of this skill after one minute.

"How the hell did you activate a deific skill?" I asked.

"You like it?" said Yaretzi. He pulled a canteen from his inventory and removed his helm, then took a long pull. "It is very interesting what one can acquire within a Special Delve."

Overall, the Littan looked very plain. Brown fur, brown eyes. Nothing noteworthy or distinct about his features at all. It was kind of disappointing.

“So... what’s your plan here?” I asked, choosing to take the opportunity to get a few things out of my *own* inventory. I filtered through the long, long list of potential items and settled on one of our pre-prepared Turtle packages.

“You are not so tough,” said Yaretzi. “Strong for level 6, but...” He waved his limp hand through the air. “Easily handled on your own.”

“Is that right?” I said, producing the canvas bag full of equipment. I started unpacking it. Yaretzi looked the contents over but didn’t move to stop me. I wasn’t sure if he *could* move to stop me. He had that flying cloak, but I wasn’t sure what the conditions were to use it. “Go on. Tell me more, Yaretzi.”

He cleared his throat as I pulled out a series of interlocking plates and began assembling a barrier. The work was tough in my injured state, but I noticed as I worked that my missing fingers had already halfway grown back. My health was much lower than it had been when I’d lost the digits, so I assumed that regrowing limbs acted independently of health. Good to know.

“Let me guess,” I said when Yaretzi failed to volunteer more. “You bring me here while I’m all beat up and on death’s door. You swallow some potions and then we wait around for a few minutes until you get the spunk to finish me off?”

“It is... not so simple as that,” he said.

“Sure,” I said slapping a couple of plates together. “Maybe you knock me out, and let me wallow in agony for a few hours until your health is back to full. Then you kill me and go out to finish everyone else off. Closer?”

He frowned at me and took another sip from his canteen.

“Maybe this place moves through time in a weird way,” I said, leaning over and peering down at the water. While it looked completely still at first glance, I could make out the faintest movement along the surface. “Thus, once you’ve tortured and killed me, when you return to the First Layer everyone else will be unprepared for your miraculous full heal.” I slapped some more plates together and watched him. He shifted uncomfortably, so I figured I was more or less correct. “Hmm, here’s a question. It says we can’t leave but does that stop me from doing this?”

I concentrated on the Closet and spent the full minute opening the portal. I didn’t want to mana-shape it since I needed to recover my resources, and if Yaretzi wanted to kill time,

then I was going to let him. The portal opened without trouble and I could see the obelisk within. I reached out and tried to put my hand through the portal, but an immovable force stopped me. I couldn't go in, but the ambient dimensional mana could come *out*.

Ambient Absorption

You are absorbing high levels of ambient Dimensional mana. Ambient mana regen is capped at 10x WIS.

+260 MP regen/hour

Total MP regen: 689/hour

Yeah, those were some good numbers.

I finished assembling the plates and attached a few long, metal slats for the feet. The result was a waist-high fortification, complete with defensive mana weaves. I slid a ruby chip into the center of the array of runes and a small dome shield formed around me. Yaretzi sat up a bit more at that.

"I see you're not bleeding anymore," I said, pulling a few more items out of the bag. "Coagulation potion? Was the other one health? Had to be. What about mana?" I set a series of Seinnador's Dazzlers onto the ground, which were magic flashbangs that burned people's eyeballs out if they weren't careful. There were also a couple of canisters using similar tech with Nuralie's poisons in them.

By the time I'd set all that up, I had regenerated 250 health and 60 mana. My fingers had grown back completely, my cheek was in one piece again, my teeth were half-grown in, and my heart no longer murmured. My ribs were still collecting themselves, but that was fine.

"How good's your alchemist?" I asked. "Did you buy the nice potions, or did you cheap out?"

Yaretzi scowled at me. Alchemists were rare. Good alchemists especially so. I doubted the Littan had access to anything nearly as robust as I did. Assuming he had basic potions and no regen evolutions, he was probably getting back a tenth of what I was over the same time period.

“You didn’t tell me how you could use a deific skill,” I said. “You got it from a Special Delve, sure, but that doesn’t give you the capacity to use that level of divine magic.”

“Yaretzi no longer feels like talking.” He pulled a knife from his inventory and threw it at the barrier. It bounced off harmlessly. He rotated his dominant wrist, testing his injury, but winced.

I crossed my legs and sat back again, feeling my ribs pop back into place. It was a wonderful feeling, like cracking all the stiffness out of your middle back. A few more minutes went by and I prodded the Littan with more questions, but he had nothing but insults and silence for me.

I was back to half health and mana in under 20 minutes, and all my bones were in much better shape. There were still a host of fractures, but my chest was no longer concave. I pulled a fresh breastplate from my inventory—nothing fancy, just some basic steel with a defensive mana weave—and slapped it on. I stood, and Yaretzi flinched as he looked me over.

“You- how did you?” he began.

“What are your normal victims like?” I asked. “Who does this work on? I mean, have you ever brought someone competent into this trap?”

A look of rage crossed his face. His cloak billowed out and he rose into the air.

“Coppers?” I continued. “Silvers? Tavio seemed like the type of guy that likes to challenge himself. He was an asshole, but he knew his shit. He named my abilities as I used them. Deduced my build from punching me around a village. But you... you’re a fucking dumbass. How did you end up in the same party?”

Yaretzi flicked his wrist and his rapier appeared. He summoned his saber into his injured hand, but I could tell it still wasn’t at 100%. He rushed toward the barrier and began slashing at it. The shield flickered and hummed under his assault. It wouldn’t hold up under his attacks for long—it was designed for hordes of mana monsters, not level 17 Delvers—but I didn’t need it to last. I activated two Dazzlers and two canisters of Nuralie’s paralytic poison and tossed them out towards him. They passed through the barrier, and I covered my eyes as all four exploded.

Yaretzi devolved into animalistic screams and guttural coughing. He continued to assault the barrier, but his attacks were weak and erratic. I produced a tinder box and a torch, lit it, then tossed it out as well. The poison erupted into a ball of flame. This not only lit Yaretzi on fire but also allowed me to drop the barrier since all the gas had burned off.

Yaretzi dove off of the ship and crashed onto the surface of the water. Whatever temporal effect it was under made it hard, or maybe just really thick. He rolled to put himself out and I hopped down after him. There was a little give to the water, but I could stand on it without trouble. I watched him for a second, observing how pitiful he'd become.

"The portal I opened made me curious about something else," I said as Yaretzi finally doused the flames. He glared at me and raised his swords, ready to charge with his cloak. "Again, the skill description said that we can't leave. But, can someone else come *in*?"

I cast Dimensional Summon and Shog'tuatha clawed his way through a tear in reality. Yaretzi's blades lowered slightly as he watched the c'thon emerge.

"Slayer. I always look forward to your call." He turned his big, black eyes on Yaretzi. **"I see you have found us another mouse to play with."**

"What- you-" Yaretzi stuttered. "How can you summon a Grade 10 beast?!"

"You said that Tavio talked about me for three days! He didn't mention this?"

"Perhaps he feared retribution, should he use my name with ill regard," Shog said, tentacles writhing and talons clacking.

I surveyed Yaretzi's expression until it dawned on me.

"You tuned him out," I said. "You lived in Yaretzi-land and ignored everything he had to say." I felt another rib pop and I thumped my chest with a fist. "Oh, that was a good one. Shog, want to grab this guy for me?"

"With pleasure."

Yaretzi turned and tried to flee as the c'thon floated toward him, but Shog struck like a coiled snake and wrapped the semi-paralyzed Littan up in a half dozen tentacles. Yaretzi managed to get a few thrusts in with his swords, but Shog quickly wrenched the man's arms in directions they weren't meant to bend. Finally, Yaretzi was subdued.

I walked forward and looked him over.

"Please, Yaretzi is helpless," he said. "I can tell you things. About the Littan military! I can tell you about the duchess and about Tavio. I'll-"

I swung hard with Somnres into Yaretzi's temple, and the Oblivion Orb that activated took half his skull with it. The man went limp, as dead as everything else in the Layer. I

spent a few moments processing the violence but found that I didn't feel very strongly one way or another about it. I was glad he was dead, and I wasn't upset that I'd been the one to kill him, but there was no exultation or joy in it. I also wasn't disturbed by it. Eventually, I shrugged and let the matter pass out of my mind.

“Do you plan to consume this corpse?” Shog asked.

“Eh, Grotto might want it for something, but the Closet is pretty self-sustaining as it is. Feel free to have it if you like.”

“Excellent!”

Shog immediately tore Yaretzi's arms off of his body, then pulled the rest of the Littan back behind his tentacles where his vicious beak began to work on it. Shog held the arms up and studied them, then wrapped two tentacles around them.

As I watched, the flesh of his c'thonic limbs melded around the Littan arms until all that could be seen were the furry hands. Shog let out an excited grunt, mouth full of Littan, then swept Yaretzi's blades off the ground in his furry new hands. He spun and slashed through the air, then did a few thrusts with the rapier. His grade got an update as he took the Littan's skills for a test drive.

Shog'tuatha: C'thon, Grade 12

Before I could ask what the fuck that was all about, the world collapsed in on me and I was splashing down into the ocean back in the First Layer.