

I hopped onto Gracovus and headed toward Nuralie's skirmish, evaluating the new combatants as I went. They were between levels 3 and 4, also Silver like their stealthy brethren, but with fewer Delves completed. As I watched, several of the souls enhanced one another, creating a multiplicative effect that created power greater than the sum of their parts. If the level 7 party was specialized around stealth, this group appeared to be specialized around buffs.

I broke through the canopy to find a complex battleground, the naturally difficult terrain of the swampy forest made even harsher with earthen walls and rocky spikes. Nuralie was surrounded by four fighters in melee, all clad in heavy armor. Two of them were in the center of the formation, wielding shields and blunt instruments—mace and hammer—while the other pair were to either side of Nuralie, flanking her with long polearms.

The polearm fighters attacked with fast, sweeping arcs, keeping Nuralie corralled in the center of the four-person formation. The archer had little recourse against their reach, holding a single dagger in her right hand while clutching Grotto in her left. The Delve Core was unmoving, but I hadn't received a jolt from him through our soul connection, so I felt that he was uninjured. What likely happened was that the mini-c'thon was rocked by the shot I took to the head and passed out from Shared Fate's feedback.

The two fighters in the center engaged Nuralie at close range, their bodies covered in translucent energy that blocked the loson's bladed swipes. Her back was against a ten-foot wall of earth and rock that curved over her head, keeping Nuralie from leaping to safety. All around were orbs of bright light, bleaching the battlefield in a glow that eliminated shadow and stopped her from using her short-range teleport.

Further back were two soldiers in chainmail, weaving spells that were the origin of the earth walls and luminous orbs. While the melee fighters kept Nuralie trapped, spikes shot up from the ground at her feet which she nimbly dodged. She was quickly running out of room and would soon be skewered.

The seventh attacker also wore mail, but with an intricate tabard that set her apart from the others. I could sense a web of connections spreading out from her to the rest of the soldiers, the threads pulsing as she issued orders. She was clearly the ranking officer and had at least one aura stacking bonuses onto her soldiers while she cast additional buffs on top.

There were also three corpses with arrows in their hearts and skulls, evidence that Nuralie hadn't been cornered without dishing some out in return.

It looked like two full parties had appeared to strike at our scout while the sniper's third group provided overwatch and tried to soften up the rest of our party. Had we been a normal group of level 6 Delvers, this tactic would have been deadly. Unfortunately for the Littans, we weren't a normal level 6 party, and I was far from an ideal target for an easy headshot.

I swept in on Gracovus and landed behind the group of four melee fighters, activating Gravity Anchor and spending additional stamina to reduce the skill's effect on Nuralie. Shouts of alarm rang out as the enemies were thrown off balance and fell toward me. I ended the Anchor before they collided with my body, leaving three of them collapsing to the ground from the sudden shift. One managed to keep upright, an ability causing his feet to sink into the wet earth and counter the pull.

I hurled a Void Hammer at one of the downed polearm fighters, taking him by surprise and removing the base of his spine as he lay face down in the mud. The officer issued a command and the battlemages changed targets from Nuralie to myself. Earthen walls surrounded me on three sides, cutting me off from chucking more hammers at the prone melee fighters.

A series of rock spikes erupted from the mud, aiming for my lower body. The Madrin armor on my legs blocked the spikes, but the garbage-tier steel breastplate failed to prevent the spikes from penetrating. The lances pierced my skin but failed to travel deep into the muscle beneath. While the attacks lacked damage, they made up for it by immobilizing me.

My Strength was a 10. That put me at the low end of superhuman but was an amount of power easily mitigated by any competent Delver, even one at low level. It was enough to give me an advantage against people who'd treated Strength as their dump stat, and it gave a boost to my throws, but it wasn't enough to be a threat on its own. My main form of escape wasn't to muscle my way out of traps and grapples but to teleport away with Shortcut. Shortcut was on cooldown due to my abuse of the skill, so I was left with little recourse against the ensnaring elemental attack.

I wasn't concerned with escaping, however. While I could eventually bash my way out with my hammer or focus on killing the officer to disrupt their chain of command, I had regained enough sense to pivot to the second role I was built into. I didn't need to kill these soldiers, the backup emerging from the forest could do that.

I reached out to Nuralie through my aura and cast Life Warden, granting her a shield that would direct half of the damage she took back to me, while also mitigating some of it. I hadn't used the ability since the mimic Delve, as the party was overall tanky enough to rarely need it.

I then raised Gracovus and used its Atrocidile roar. The spectral, uncanny valley face of the monster erupted from the front of the shield and let out an unholy scream. One of the battlemages fumbled his spell, flinching at the sound and taking a step back. The second mage's features twisted, but he managed to resist the effect and sent another pair of rock spikes into my ribs. The officer appeared unaffected, but this was quickly proven untrue when she pointed at me and began screaming fresh orders.

The orders were issued in Imperial, but I'd taught myself the language before we departed Hiward. It generally translated to "Jesus fucking Christ, kill that fucking guy, holy shit kill him with fire and scatter his cursed ashes into a bottomless pit," or something along those lines.

I felt damage transfer through my shield on Nuralie as the melee fighters re-engaged. One mage focused his resolve to rally from the fear effect, the second wound up for another volley of uninspired elemental attacks, and the officer sent out a fresh AOE buff. Then, the rest of my party arrived.

A pillar of crimson flame descended on the officer. The fire that ignited her body was mundane, rather than Divine, but it did the job all the same. A glint of metal flashed through the air as Varrin's blade cut one of the mages in half, the attack so fast it was barely visible. A series of small orbs appeared all around the second mage, then burst into fragments. The mana gathered around the soldier's fingers evaporated when one orb burst near his hands, and the fragments cut a hundred small holes through his body.

Behind me, I felt Shog crash into the line of melee fighters. He turned one of the poleaxe wielders into Swiss cheese with thrusts from his pair of blades while wrapping up a heavy fighter in his tentacles. The venomous barb at the end of one feeler began stabbing through the man's visor with quick strikes. Nuralie had the space to duck past a poleaxe wielder and stab the attacker in the neck.

The final heavy warrior paused his assault, realizing that he was suddenly alone. He then displayed a level of wisdom hitherto unseen on this battlefield: he dropped his weapon and surrendered. I took a breath as I scanned the forest for more surprises, but found none.

I started to hammer away at the spikes trapping me, but the extent of my injuries became clear as my battle trance began to fade. My legs were scorched, the muscles twitching as I struggled to stand. My abdomen felt like it had gone through a blender, and my core strength was virtually nonexistent as a result. My scalp was on fire as my blistered skin shed. There was also the matter of the hole through my head.

Varrin approached and began breaking the spikes with his gauntleted hands as though they were loosely packed sand while Shog and Nuralie locked down the surrendering soldier. Xim ran up to me and immediately began channeling Heal into my body.

Most of my wounds responded. My burns quickly receded and my gut sealed itself back up. I felt the healing reach my head and, while the skin regenerated, it halted at my missing eyes and gray matter. I closed off my perception of the outside world and focused on the sensation when a second mind inhabited my own.

*[I feel that my side of our Shared Fate connection has thus far been an unjust bargain in your favor.]*

I felt Grotto begin to root around, seeking out the boundaries of the damage to my brain. The Delve Core had always possessed an incredible level of insight into my biological functions, but this particular scan went even deeper.

I still had my Soul-Sight cranked to 11, but I'd limited it to myself once the combat had been resolved. At least, I'd tried to. My normal connection with Grotto was still abundantly clear and the more robust contact that I'd made when using Reveal at the start of the fight was still going strong. Grotto was tapping into my perception to study the shape of my soul around the damage.

He helped Xim's mana to gather around the lingering hole and tapped directly into my regeneration evolution Just a Flesh Wound. He combined the two and coaxed my cells to regenerate more rapidly while using his perception of my organic functions to help guide the process. After a couple of minutes, I was fully healed. I opened my eyes and was assaulted by flashes of memory and sensation.

My regenerative ability recreated missing body parts as they existed at the time of their destruction. Normally, that wasn't an issue. An arm or tooth from an hour ago wasn't too different. When it came to my fleshy CPU, however, it felt like a piece of my consciousness was teleported several minutes into the future. It created a hodgepodge of images and impressions which struggled to reconcile themselves. I felt an incredible sense of Déjà vu as the two halves of my mind came to a consensus.

Xim grabbed my arm to steady me as I swayed in place. Finally, I opened my eyes to find her oddly excited.

"What did you just do?" she asked. Her borderline giddy tone was at complete odds with the macabre scene surrounding us.

"Uhhh..." I blinked several times and stared at the ground, trying to clear away the remaining cobwebs coating my thoughts. "Which part?"

“Making your brain come back so fast,” she said. “When I use Heal, I can sense the damage inside of a person. My mana distributes itself around the body, letting me affect everything at once, but not allowing me to concentrate on any particular area.” She said all of this rapid-fire, talking to herself as much as to me. “It helps fix anything that would heal on its own over time and under the best possible circumstances, but I can’t help much with the types of damage that would be permanent. Whatever you just did allowed me to break that restriction.”

She let go of my arm and took a few steps away, running a hand through her dark, curly hair.

“I *felt* my mana healing you at a level way higher than what I can do right now.”

“Grotto used my regeneration evolution. He sped it up.”

“That makes sense! But, he used *my* mana to do it. I felt the entire process. I saw how the mana could be focused and accomplish more than it normally can. I think... I think I can replicate it. Hells, I need to meditate.”

She plopped down in the mud right there and closed her eyes. Varrin and I watched her for a second, then the big guy looked at me with concern.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yes?” I said, unsure. “I mean, that was... an experience. I’m fine physically, but I’ll need to process for a while.”

He gave me a curt nod and a clap on the shoulder.

“I’m glad,” he said, then left me to approach our captive.

Something about both Xim and Varrin treating my head half exploding like any other day with Fortune’s Folly made me feel a little less freaked out. Part of me thought that I should feel the opposite, but it wasn’t the time to get too introspective. For all I knew, there was a Littan legion marching on our position at that very moment. I turned to follow Varrin, walking around the wall of earth and rock that had barricaded me in. I placed eyes on the captive.

The man had a grim look on his face, outwardly determined and unfaltering, but it was only skin deep. I could tell he was terrified, which was understandable. A Grade 12 mana fiend was clutching him in several feelers while sniffing him with delight.

Varrin looked at me with a raised eyebrow, and I nodded.

“Why don’t you take this one,” I said. I took a seat on a large root, then reached up and felt my head. While my wounds had healed, my hair was missing. I still had my eyebrows and all hair below my ears, so it wasn’t a total loss. Maybe I could rock the Greek demigod look for a while.

Varrin turned to the prisoner. He removed his helm and fixed the Littan with a frightening, albeit professional, stare.

“For the sake of your fellow soldiers,” he said, “you will answer a few questions.”