

Etja didn't have the mana to fly us all to shore with Varrin's legs disabled *while* dodging magic cannonballs and, even if she could, I had no idea what skills or tricks Yaretzi was hiding up his sleeve. I somehow doubted he was taking it easy on us because he had to or out of pity. If anything, it looked like he was having some fun. Regardless, the Delver caravels would destroy the galleon before Xim could finish her healing, so the caravels had to go.

The moment we rose over the galleon's deck, five cannons began trumpeting their disapproval over our existence. Two level 3 Delvers from each caravel fired shots from the mana-enhanced big guns, then moved down the line to the next pair of cannons. That is, except for the central ship where one cannoneer was unconscious due to severe hand trauma.

A third Delver on each crew—Speed-focused—reloaded the spent weapons so quickly that I wondered if they'd put points in any other stat. The fourth member of each was a caster who began throwing up a shielding spell and who was likely responsible for the illusions that kept the boats invisible as well. The fifth directed their actions and looked built for close combat, potentially with some sort of Leadership or party buffs. The groups looked purpose-built to man these ships, and the idea of a navy dictating a Delver's build specifically for military application chilled me.

One of the caravels could easily sneak up on and devastate a traditional warship many times its own size, evidenced by the rapidly sinking galleon I'd departed, but they were ill-equipped to handle my party. Even with superhuman accuracy and skill, cannons weren't meant to hit fast-moving aerial targets, and I wove between the shots on the back of Gracovus as I summoned Somnres into my hand.

Etja immediately began sending a disintegrating ray at the southernmost caravel as Nuralie downed an unknown potion and then followed up the mage's attacks with a volley of arrows. The archer's missiles disappeared as soon as they left her bow, blinking back into existence when they crashed against the enemy spellslinger's shield alongside Etja's beam.

Waves of force rippled along the surface of the spell, but runes flared on the body of the caravel, flooding the mage's body with mana and reinforcing the barrier while the cannons returned fire. Etja kept Nuralie and herself flying on a wandering course through the air, dodging the projectiles as the pair laid into the shield again. The runes began to smolder, then burst, and the shield flickered as the mage gasped and fell to a knee. The runes, like the spiked weapon, had a cost, and the copper was now paying that price. Nuralie sent a final arrow down while the caster struggled with what I suspected was a sudden, acute case of mana toxicity. This arrow was slower than the

others, and the enemy mage recomposed himself enough to thrust a hand out and halt the missile with some form of telekinesis when it was a few feet away from his chest.

The arrow had a blunt tip and a payload, however. It was one of Nuralie's experiments in fletching, and it didn't need to make contact to activate. The end of the arrow exploded into a murky green cloud as it hung in the air, and there was no shield spell to stop it.

The entire deck of the caravel was covered in poisonous gas and its effects were immediate. The Delvers manning the cannons gave up on their attack and grasped at their throats, doubling over and beginning to empty their stomachs. The Speed-focused Delver pulled out two potions, presumably antidotes, but his movements had become slow and clumsy. He fumbled one and it shattered on the deck of the ship. He downed the second, but I knew from experience it wouldn't help. It would cleanse the poison he had, but the cloud lingered and he would get re-poisoned immediately. The man was either panicking, or this team didn't have much experience with persistent clouds of toxic gas. My party might have been somewhat unique with that experience, so I tried not to make any harsh judgments about their competency.

Etja used the opportunity to carve out the bottom of the caravel, cutting the lower hull apart with her destructive beam. Nuralie produced a final arrow, one with a flame at its end, and fired it into the cloud. It ignited the gas, which exploded in a ball of blue-white flame. The enemy Delvers were no longer immersed in a deadly haze but were now on fire. The mage and the speedster both collapsed—what little Fortitude they had exhausted—and the cannon crew and captain dove into the water.

"Drop me," Nuralie said to Etja, who nodded and let Nuralie free of her Siphon spell. The alchemist-archer fell to the sea, rotating in the air and kicking off her boots before hitting the waves with a perfect forward dive. Nuralie was a member of the loson subrace called the Geulon, and the Geulon were best known for thriving in wet environments. I imagined it was one reason she got along so well with her frogs.

Before long, the Delvers who had leaped into the ocean to douse themselves would begin disappearing beneath the surface, never to be seen again.

While Etja and Nuralie dealt with the southern caravel, I made it my mission to draw fire from the other two. I had Somnres in a throwing-hammer shape and began to unload with a combination of two of its abilities.

Somnres can be summoned and dismissed at will.

Whenever you make a thrown weapon attack with Somnrcres you may create up to X fleeting copies, where X is your INT/10. Each copy costs 2 mana to create. These copies possess all qualities imbued into Somnrcres at the moment the copies are created.

I threw Somnrcres at the northern caravel, activating its copy ability and adding two ethereal versions of the hammer that followed behind it on its flight path. I immediately dismissed Somnrcres, which caused the lead version of the hammer to disappear but left the two copies still hurtling at my target, which was the mage managing the vessel's shield. Then, I summoned Somnrcres back into my hand and threw it again.

This allowed me to make attacks without using Homing Weapon to get my hammer back *and* to make thrown weapon attacks even faster than if I were pulling extra hammers out of my inventory. I'd also picked up a fresh Blunt evolution when I'd reached level 20 in the intrinsic that gave my throws an extra perk.

Hammerang (Blunt 20)

You gain enhanced control over the path of thrown hammers, allowing you to imbue their flight with otherwise impossible arcs and patterns. The degree of control and the complexity of the arcs you can imbue are based on your level in Blunt.

Now I had access to a poor man's Homing Weapon by arcing my hammer's path with Hammerang and then using Somnrcres's ability to summon it back to me and let the copies do the work. However, Homing Weapon also added speed and damage to the attack, so I used it anyway. An enemy-seeking hammer that not only locked onto an enemy and sought them out but *also* flew around or behind the enemy first was a pretty neat trick, I thought.

I was also able to use Hammerang for other, more interesting synergies...

I sent six fleeting hammers at the northern caravel on three different arcs from either side and above. After bonuses from Homing Weapon and my leveled-up Blunt skill, the

speed of these hammers was currently sitting at around 400 miles per hour. We were now at 52% of the speed of sound.

While those attacks rocked the shield on the northern boat, I lobbed six more copied hammers at the center boat, right at Yaretzi's stupid fucking face. For these attacks, I lovingly layered on Oblivion Orb. Since Somnres's copies "possessed all qualities imbued" into the weapon when I spawned them, they copied the spell as well.

So, for one activation of my self-titled Void Hammer combo, I got three—or two, if I wanted the real Somnres back before the attack landed. Since the copies cost a touch of mana to make, it wasn't a massive mana efficiency boost, but it would compound as I raised my Intelligence and could generate more copies at once. I envisioned a future in which a sky full of reality-erasing hammers crashed down on my foes as I cackled madly at the devastation. Either way, it sure saved a lot of *stamina* since Homing Weapon wasn't cheap.

While the northern shield shakily held up under the assault of my:

very-fast-but-not-quite-fast-enough-yet-to-make-a-big-boom-sound hammers, the shield over the central caravel did not withstand the impact of my:

also-very-fast-but-takes-bowling-ball-sized-chunks-out-of-the-universe-as-well hammers.

The runes on the ship flashed and exploded into sprays of sparking mana, sending the woman maintaining that vessel's shield to the ground from the blowback. Two of the hammers made it through the collapsed barrier—one fleeting and one the true Somnres—heading straight for Yaretzi, and the audaciously armored fighter pulled a rapier out of nowhere. With a graceful flick and a blur of speed, he turned the first hammer aside, which smashed down into the deck of the caravel and ripped a massive hole out as Oblivion Orb activated. He didn't have time to avoid Somnres, but there was a burst of familiar blue light from his offhand as he *dispelled* the Oblivion Orb imbued into the weapon before it struck. The hammer collided with his helm and sent the man cartwheeling off the deck of the ship.

While the Dispel had certainly saved Yaretzi from some serious bonus damage, my gut told me that Yaretzi had thought *all* of my hammers were a spell of some sort, and he was counting on the move deleting the entire hammer. Sadly—for him, not for me, I was fucking overjoyed—he was mistaken. I understood his confusion as I dismissed and resummoned Somnres to my hand before it flew back to me. The thing popped in and out of existence like something someone had conjured. Not a spell though, just a

sweet-ass dream hammer. It would probably have worked on the copies since they were made of mana, but I wasn't sure. Something to test out later.

While Yaretzi took a swim and the southern boat burned as an apex water predator finished off its crew, I swung in low over the central ship and jumped off of Gracorus to face the crew head-on. I figured that I could save some resources taking on this team in melee, and I also wanted at least one of these boats intact by the end of our fight. We still needed a practical way to shore, and the Littan military owed us a seaworthy vessel after blowing ours up.

The northern caravel changed targets off of me to Etja. They were willing to fire on their allies on the galleon, just not their *Delver* allies on the sister caravel. That was my assumption at least, and it disgusted me. That made what I had to do easier.

"Your party comp is made for these boats," I said, looking over the Littans before me. I stepped over the handless man and the mage shuffled back on her hands and knees. "How well does it function in a straight fight?"

The Speed-focused Delver rushed me with a shortsword while their commander cast a buff on him. From watching the speedster load the cannons, I knew that he had to at least match Varrin for the stat, which put him somewhere in the 20's. A full copper was truly level 3.75, not 3, with 48 stat points to play with. Fully half of this man's stats were in Speed, which left him with very little for anything else. I also doubted that he had much in the way of the Blades intrinsic, especially if he'd focused heavily on skills for these dumb little boats. I thought about letting him hit me to confirm my suspicions, but there was no reason to be sloppy.

He was fast, but my own Speed evolution made my blocks almost as quick. Gracorus slapped onto my arm guard and I brought it up to halt his blade. It was a basic Delver weapon with a minor mana weave, but nothing more. I blocked it easily, then brought Somnres around. The man ducked back to avoid the weapon, which was still in its short, throwing hammer form, but I adjusted its size as I swung until it was a full hand-and-a-half war hammer.

His dodge had been made with precision, moving only far enough away to avoid the attack and keep himself close for a counter. It was a good instinct, but it did him a disservice in this instance. Somnres caught him in the ribs. His simple leather armor did nothing to soften the penetrating blow and I heard his ribs crunch as the air was knocked from his lungs with a sharp, rattling breath. He didn't immediately perish, which meant he'd put a lot of his remaining points in Fortitude, or maybe the captain's buff had given him an edge. The strike still laid him out, however, so either way it hadn't been enough.

The captain shouted a few words in Imperial and I felt the familiar tug of a Charisma attack on my mind. My Wisdom and mental defenses were too high, so whatever it was didn't take effect. Two arrows hit me; one in my shield and one in my chest. I looked over to see the cannoneer with a bow out, drawing back for another shot.

HP: 1209 -> 1178

His attack hadn't done a lot, but it pierced my armor and did enough to settle my mind over something I'd been struggling with.

A part of me felt bad for this level 3 group. I didn't know why they'd been given this assignment, and while I'd made some assumptions about them based on the lack of empathy their actions had shown for their fellow soldiers, I had no idea what might have pressed them into this role. It was possible the Empire had draconic rules surrounding their Delvers and forced them to take these boats for a test drive with sinister orders. Yaretzi himself might have threatened them into firing on the galleon, which didn't seem unlikely given how he'd been berating them. At the end of the day, this *could* be a group of fairly decent people placed into a bad situation.

My mind flashed back to the peasant Delvers being cut down by my allies back in the Calvani Caverns while I'd been disabled by Orexis's soul presence. That surprise attack on people we barely knew a thing about had never sat well with me, even if the circumstances had pointed to them being involved with nefarious activities.

I had no desire to kill these Delvers, but I also didn't want to allow myself to become blinded by a self-sacrificing pursuit of righteousness. My party had followed Imperial law, gotten our passes, and been detained without cause. Now we were facing down escalating lethal force to try and stop us from reaching Eschundur, a place we needed to go to have a *shot* at giving the world better resources against the avatars. That wasn't an immediate goal, though, and these people had no idea how important we felt our mission was. More immediate and more personal was the fact that these Littans wanted to take Nuralie, and I was pretty sure what would happen to her if they succeeded. *They* knew what would happen to her if they succeeded.

Unlike the regular soldiers, who could do little or nothing to harm me, these Delvers were weapons that could hurt. Unlike the slaughter in the caves a year and a half ago, we did not possess an overwhelming force that gave us the luxury of options. When

Yaretzi eventually hauled his ass out of the water these level 3's would become too much of a risk to me and my allies. We'd need to be wholly focused on the level 17.

So, instead of stepping over the prone speedster who could use my mercy to get up and stab me in the back or toss potions to his allies, I brought my hammer down on his skull. It was a gruesome, calculated act, and the first choice I'd made that truly forced me to question whether the path I was walking was a noble one.

I pushed the rest of my doubts aside and rushed the cannoneer.

Archers benefitted from range and an open, complex battlefield. This archer had neither. He fired more shots, infused with skills, but they struck harmlessly against my shield. He backed up a few feet but ran into the railing and had a split second to decide if he would dive off to avoid me. He hesitated, perhaps because he'd noticed that his allies who had dived in had never resurfaced, and when I got close I brought my hammer down on his thigh, bone snapping under the attack. He fell and a strike to the head finished him.

I turned to find the mage heaving herself into the water while pulling the handless man with her. The captain had a mace out and tried out a different Charisma attack, but this one too failed. I shrank Somnres and threw it at his chest. He wasn't quick enough to dodge and, even without Oblivion Orb, the hammer crushed him and his corpse flew off of the boat into the sea.

"Tavio was right," Yaretzi said from my left, and I jerked my head to find him hanging on to the side of the ship, peeking over the boat's railing. His wet, dripping helmet sported a massive dent. "You are too strong for your level."