

Varrin was somewhere near a retreating galleon north of our position and the four of us quickly flew over. Etja set Xim and Nuralie down on the ship's deck both to give her mana a break and also to help me search for the big guy, which was distressing for the Littans aboard the vessel. The ladies gave the crew a few mean looks and they backed off without much trouble.

Varrin had taken a burst of damage while I felt for his location earlier, which indicated he'd been attacked by something that could not only hurt him but hurt him severely. The good news was that he hadn't taken any further damage, but the view my aura gave me of his surroundings placed the man underwater. Even if whatever attacked him had backed off, drowning was a minor concern. Varrin had plenty of stamina, so we had several minutes to find him and figure out what was going on, but there still wasn't much room for dawdling.

The bad news was that there was a level 17 Littan—full gold—slowly rising into the air off the Galleon's starboard side.

The man was clad in ostentatious armor, which is saying a lot considering my own getup. It was bright blue and silver mail that was studded with rows of gemstones in swirling patterns. He wore a tabard that looked like a rhinestone cowboy's kitchen apron, with the sparkling image of a bird as its central coat of arms. It looked suspiciously like a rooster.

On top of all that, the man's headgear was in the style of a frog-mouth helm like the ones used in jousting tournaments but had a massive, shining crest on top that looked like it was made from fine threads of spun moonlight. He held one hand tucked behind his back with the second outstretched as if he were holding a fencing blade or rapier, but it was empty. He brought the hand around from behind him and gave me a jaunty wave.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Correct me if I am wrong, but you are Esquire Arlo, aye?"

The man's level and the fact that he knew my name both gave me a very bad feeling.

"I am," I said.

"Oh, this is wonderful news!" he said. "Yaretzi has heard many good things about you!"

I raised an eyebrow at his use of the third person.

"Did Yaretzi happen to hear these things from a guy named Tavio?"

“Aye, yes!” he replied, still floating slowly upward. “It is all that Tavio would speak about for *three* days. He sometimes becomes obsessed, you see, and he is still very curious about your party. Gharifon, though... he was not so impressed.”

“I’ll try not to take it personally,” I said. “Is Yaretzi the reason one of my party members is sinking to the bottom of the ocean?”

The man fully bent over to look down at the water below him, then righted himself and shrugged.

“Yaretzi saw a man trying to sink this galleon. Yaretzi stopped him.”

I turned and caught Etja’s eye, then nodded at the water.

“I’ll get him,” she said, then flew off the side of the boat and into the drink.

“Well, if you see this Yaretzi fellow, you should let him know that I’m unhappy he attacked my group. Otherwise, we were just finishing up here and heading to shore. So, nice chat.”

The man placed a hand on his chest.

“Yaretzi *is* Yaretzi,” he said.

“Sure, that makes sense,” I said. “Who else would Yaretzi be *but* Yaretzi? Anyway, if you run into him, let him know that I think he’s kind of a dick for what he did to Varrin.”

I looked down at the gentle waves, waiting for Etja to reappear, hopefully with our missing warrior. The man scratched at his helm.

“You are fucking with Yaretzi,” he said. “That is unkind.”

“Wait,” I said. “I’m confused. Is Yaretzi in the room with us right now?”

“We are not in a room.”

“Is he *outside* of the room?”

He threw his arms out.

“What room?!” he shouted.

“The room where Yaretzi is!” I shouted back.

“Yaretzi is not *in* a room!”

“Then where the hell *is* Yaretzi?!”

“Right here! In the air! Over the sea!”

“Is he behind you?” I asked, floating myself around the man with Gracorus. He was still rising upwards in the air. “I don’t see him.”

He crossed his arms and harrumphed.

“Yaretzi will play this game no longer.”

Etja’s head popped out from the water.

“Varrin won’t stop sinking!” she said. “I can’t get him back up, even with Siphon!”

I looked down at her, then up at Yaretzi, who was still rising. The movement didn’t make much sense, since he was already above the level of the galleon’s deck. I was even having to rise as well to stay level with him. It was slow, but consistent, perhaps about the speed of something sinking. A few things clicked together for me.

“Are you... moving in the opposite direction of Varrin?” I asked.

“I am!” he said.

“And can Varrin *not* move in the same direction as you at the moment?”

“You figured that out pretty quick! Tavio will be pleased.”

“Would you mind stopping that?”

“It depends,” he said. “You never asked for this one’s name. It is rude.”

I frowned at him. Now this guy was fucking with *me*.

“Alright,” I said. “What is your name, mister sir?”

“This one’s name,” he said, casting his arms out again, “is Yaretzi!”

In time with the man’s proclamation of identity, a massive web of multicolored lightning erupted from the ocean below, ripping into the hull of the galleon. Xim and Nuralie were caught up in the crackling energy, their bodies seizing for a second as it coursed through them. Planks shattered under the force of the attack and flames flared up where the boat was struck. Several of the Littan soldiers were vaporized, their flesh scoured clean from bones that clattered to the deck in ashy piles.

I was distracted by the spectacle and when I turned back to Yaretzi, the man was plummeting down to the sea. Before he made contact with the ocean, however, he disappeared in a hazy blur. I focused on the spot where he'd evanesced and realized that there was a wake moving through the water as if a boat was gently cruising by, but with no boat to speak of. After a few seconds of concentration, I was able to pierce the illusion and see three entire caravels crewed by full five-person teams of level 3 coppers.

The ships were absolutely stuffed full of cannons and ballistas, which looked completely out of place sitting on the decks of the smaller watercraft, but the weapons that lined their sides were overshadowed by the twelve-foot spikes of metal that sat on the bow of each ship. The spikes were covered in glowing runes and sat on large, gimbaled mounts, with large handles along the back, presumably to turn and aim the weapon. The one upon the lead ship sizzled with venting mana. Yaretzi stood on the deck of that vessel, looking down at one of the level 3s who'd fallen on his side, screaming and waving smoking, skeletonized hands in the air.

I checked on the status of Xim and Nuralie, finding that neither of them had taken significant damage from the rainbow lightning, but noted that they'd each taken a small hit to their stamina and mana as well. Whatever weapon that Delver crew had just fired did more damage to the Littans than it had to us.

Etja blasted out of the water with Varrin in a bridal carry. She took in the destruction with wide eyes, but swiftly deposited the big guy on the deck of the galleon, away from the flames, where he began to sputter and cough. The fires along the ship were growing, but the crew was already working with buckets of water to try and douse the flames. The captain of the vessel barked orders and cast an angry glance at the rest of my party. I swung in close on Gracorus and hopped off onto the ship while keeping an eye on Yaretzi. He was berating the level 3 crew over something.

"You okay?" I asked, looking Varrin over.

"The bastard cut my hamstrings," he said through deep breaths. "Then he kicked me between the shoulders and into the water. I never even saw him." I grimaced.

"Will a Heal fix that?" I asked, looking at Xim. The cleric could regenerate damaged muscle and bone, she could even replenish lost blood to a degree, but she couldn't regrow something like an organ that had been removed or a stretch of intestine that had a big scoop taken out of it. I wasn't sure where a severed tendon fell on that spectrum.

"An Intelligence healer would be faster," she said. "I'll have to concentrate on it."

“How long?”

“A couple of minutes or so.”

I turned back to the caravels. Yaretzi had finished dressing down the lead boat’s crew and the other two ships seemed to be awaiting his orders. They all gave the spike weapons a wide berth.

“Reckon he’ll be happy with his cheap shot and let us go?” I asked.

“I don’t even know what happened,” said Xim, keeping her eyes on Varrin’s wounds as she focused a low-power Heal on the backs of his legs. “Where’d that lightning come from?”

“Right, they’re still invisible,” I said. “Get ready for an Arlo upload.”

The party steeled themselves as I connected to each of their souls and used Reveal, sharing my ability to see through the illusion that cloaked the caravels.

“The Littans have been experimenting,” Varrin growled once he caught sight of the vessels. “That spike cannon on the front looks like Madrin. The traditional cannons look like dark iron.”

Yaretzi turned around, looked up to see me, and then gave me another wave. He gripped two large handles at the rear of the caravel’s magic gun and swung it in the galleon’s direction.

“Shit is he gonna—” The runes along the body of the weapon lit up. “Hey!” I shouted. “You’re firing on your own ship! You’re going to sink your own galleon!”

“No, no!” Yaretzi shouted back. “*You* are sinking the galleon, you fiendish Delves! By the time *I* arrived, all that was left for me was flotsam and vengeance!”

He fired, and I dove to the deck of the ship with my allies. The kaleidoscopic web of lightning crackled across the boat’s hull then arced over the side and struck at the deck with enough force to shatter planks. A dozen more Littan soldiers were annihilated, their bodies reduced to charred embers. The flames that the crew had been diligently extinguishing redoubled, joined by a score of new fires. One of the bolts struck my armor, but like with Xim and Nuralie before it didn’t do much.

**HP: 1220 -> 1209**

**Stamina: 364 -> 359**

**Mana: 250 -> 245**

“What the fuck?!” I said, jumping back to my feet. Yaretzi was yelling at the other two boats and gesturing at their big guns, but the Delves were understandably hesitant. Even Yaretzi’s hands now smoldered, and the person that I suspected first shot the spike cannon, losing their hands in the process, had passed out. Instead, the crews started manning the normal cannons and ballistas.

The galleon’s captain was beginning to lose control over his surviving soldiers, who were panicking, unable to see the enemy that was attacking them. A few had already begun jumping overboard. I went over to look down the side of the galleon, finding the hull ruined and the ship taking in water. Before long the vessel would be a sinking inferno.

“Those smaller cannons have mana threads running through them,” said Etja.

“So they’re all magic bullshit guns,” I said. “Of course.”

“What did he mean when he said that *we’re* the ones sinking this ship?” Etja asked.

“He can shoot all he wants,” said Varrin, “and we’ll take the blame.”

“What about the Littan crew? They can see we aren’t attacking!”

“Yaretzi is invisible to them,” I said. “We’ve already destroyed three vessels. It’ll be rank and file reporting that there were Delves and Delver magic sinking non-Delver boats. Just because they’re confused about where the spell came from won’t change much.”

I looked around at the rapidly burning ship. There was a loud report and part of the deck exploded as the caravels started firing ‘normal’ cannons. Their ships were much smaller than the galleon, so their angle was too low to hit us directly on the deck of the taller vessel. Still, whatever the cannonballs were made of went through the ship like its hull had been assembled from clouds and wishes.

“Fine,” I said. “If he’s going to try and frame us for blowing up his boats, we may as well actually blow some boats up. *More* boats, that is.” I looked over the group. “Xim, your first priority is to get Varrin upright. Preferably before this ship sinks. Etja, Nuralie, there’s three of us and there’s three of them.”

“Sixteen, actually,” said Xim. “Three boats crewed by five Delves each, plus Yaretzi.”

“Thank you for the clarification,” I said. “There's three of us and *sixteen* of them. I'll distract Yarezi. You two focus one caravel down, then move in on the other. Ranged air superiority, got it?”

They each nodded, and I hopped back up onto Gracovus. Then we started our strafing runs.