

Turns out *Homing Weapon* was not a *Guaranteed Hit*, as the flappy asshats were still able to swoop out of the way of my thrown axe, technique be damned. The ability guided the weapon toward my target, but the axe didn't turn on a dime when the chosen creature dodged last second.

It had perhaps been a bit optimistic to assume that I, with three visits to the axe-throwing range for a round of tossing axes while tossing back beers, would be able to outshoot Nuralie, a trained archer, even with my shiny new method of deathdealing.

After four throws, I'd managed to down just one, and the superstar I'd toppled was struggling back onto its... legs?

The starfish was not in a good way, but it was still in the fight. It had a score of holes across its body, mostly on its limbs where my attacks had been focused. My wand had been next to useless, as the magic bolts it shot had taken chunks out of the surface of the limbs without penetrating. My two *Oblivion Orb*-infused attacks were the only ones that had gone deep and damaged the internal muscle, and I suspected that the paralytic arrows Nuralie had fired were responsible for most of the monster's present sluggishness.

I was preparing for round three, estimating my chances of killing the creature with the three uses of *Nimean Weapon* I had left in my vanishing mana pool when I heard Varrin let out a triumphant roarsavage scream.

I chanced a look in his direction and saw him grappled in the center of the mega-Hand he and Xim had been fighting, but his greatsword had gone completely through his opponent's center. The whole body of the starfish shuddered as Varrin let out his victory cry. Then, it toppled forward onto him.

Varrin's jubilation turned to violent swears as he disappeared beneath the beast, and Xim turned to scan the battle, eyes fixing on me.

"Aim for the center!" she shouted, then rushed to try and lift the Hand off of Varrin. The thing was huge, but she was no slouch for Strength, and neither was Varrin. They might pull it off.

Even if I'd wanted to help them, I had my own battle to fight before I could.

As the semi-paralyzed Hand stood, I looked over its center, trying to see what Xim had been talking about. I noticed a single, large wound where one of my wand bolts had struck it in the middle, and it was much larger and deeper than any of the others.

“Fucking starfish has a weak spot in the center,” I grumbled as I tossed my axe away at another Eye, then pulled out *Arbitros*. I spun it so that its spike was facing forward and began running at the monster. “Who would have guessed?”

I ignored any semblance of defense, gripping the hammer in two hands and charging, winding up for one big swing. When I got within the Hand’s reach, its three upper limbs all crashed down toward me, but I was already bringing the hammer around laterally while using one of my few remaining casts of *Nimean Weapon*. The spike hit home as all three limbs smashed down onto my back, and *Oblivion Orb* popped off inside of the five-limbed monster’s middle.

I was crushed into the ground by its attack, but I felt a shudder go through the monstrous Hand, and then I found myself in the same position as Varrin, buried underneath its substantial bulk.

Perhaps it was their deadman’s switch. Attack the center to kill it, it flops over on top of you, killing you right back.

Fortunately, while the crush-and-tackle combo had taken away a nice chunk of my health bar, I was still far from dead, although I felt the familiar sharp pain of cracked ribs.

**HP: 285 -> 213**

“Got mine!” I yelled, knowing there was little chance anyone heard me through the corpse encompassing my whole body. It was more for myself than anything.

Several of the sub-hands continued to grasp and claw at my back, but they were quickly going limp. I was face down on the floor and was mildly dismayed when the roots covering it began to wriggle up and around my neck.

“Nope, not doing that!” I said with a groan as I began the most challenging pushup of my life. I imagined the floor as my most hated enemy, which it may as well have been given that it was actively trying to strangle me, and tried to shove it away with everything I had. I was able to do *infinite* pushups with a Strength of nine, so I damn well better be able to do *one* ultra-pushup with a Strength of ten.

My jaw was set and I felt blood pounding in my head as I tightened my core into a sheet of steel and pressed. I went up an inch, then another, until the fleshy roots around my neck were straining and beginning to snap. The creature’s scent filled my nose and I

focused on my breath, exhaling the smell of rot and soil through clenched teeth. I was able to bring up a knee and wedge it into the ground, then lock my elbows.

The mass on top of me was heavy, but it also covered a lot of ground. Some of the weight was distributed onto the floor around me, allowing me to form a little Arlo-cocoon in the center. Warm, sappy blood poured down on top of me, and one resilient sub-pinky was giving me a bloody wet-willy.

I managed to crawl forward, snapping away roots from my wrists and ankles as I went, until I found the edge of the starfish and squeezed out from beneath it. I took a deep breath of somewhat fresher air, then pushed to standing. I turned around, realizing that I'd left my hammer beneath the thing.

Guess I'll get that back later.

I checked my HUD and looked at the fight, trying to see where I would be needed next. Six of the Eyes still fluttered. Xim had Varrin by the wrists and was pulling him from beneath their corpse. Shog had reversed the tide of his fight, seemingly having heard Xim's advice, now clawing wildly at his monster's center. The starfish was lifting its body from the ground, then smashing down on top of Shog over and over again, but the c'thon had the same number of fucks to give as a goddamn Honey badger. Etja...

Etja had just run out of mana.

I reached out to *Gracovus*, the shield still hanging in the air where it had intercepted the acidic attack on Nuralie, and commanded it to fly toward Etja. Some concern entered my mind as it left a trail of caustic smoke in its wake. It would be a pretty dick move to break the gift Varrin's family had given me on the same day I'd received it. Assuming it was the same day, that is.

The Hand that Etja'd been wrangling hit the ground with a thud and instantly flopped upright. I ran toward the pair of them, but my shield made it there first, swinging around the Hand and between it and Etja. I didn't know how anchored *Gracovus* was while in flight mode. It had stopped Varrin's full-power greatsword swing and hadn't budged when hit by the Bloom's super-soaker attack.

However, the Hand showed me that my shield was not an immovable object, its arm bashing into the targe twice before a third hit sent *Gracovus'* slabs scattering across the battlefield. Either it wasn't strong enough to weather repeat attacks of that force, or it had been weakened by the Bloom's acid.

I had enough mana for one final *Shortcut* in me but I didn't want to burn my final use of the tactic if I didn't have to. I pulled a spear from my inventory, aimed for the center of

the monster's back, then used *Homing Weapon* to turn my amateur javelin throw into an Olympic-level shot. The spear buried itself in the Hand, making its limbs recoil backward toward the injury, just as a beam of crimson light blasted down from the sky on top of it.

I watched the Hand, and my spear, become engulfed by Xim's divine fire as the last of Cleric's mana bar blinked away as well. The monster began to cartwheel, its spinning, flaming body causing me to pause and appreciate the absurdity of my present life circumstances.

The thing had the 'roll' down, but had forgotten the 'stop and drop' bit. I guess they didn't teach basic fire safety in divine-monstrosity school.

However, the Hand's trajectory wasn't panicked or aimless. It rolled right back at the person who'd tried to incinerate it. Xim dove behind the corpse of the horror-star Varrin had killed, while the big man wiped a bloody hand off on a towel I assumed he kept in his inventory for that very purpose.

Varrin tossed the cloth to the floor, then adjusted his grip on his greatsword and prepared to receive the acrobatic charge. His health was in worse shape than my own, and I didn't like the odds of him in a one-on-one with a hand of burning death that was graded for someone with four times as many stats, regardless of the monster's current status as a blackened seafood skewer.

I prepared to cast my final *Shortcut* to join Varrin in his fight when the Hand began to veer slightly off course. Varrin held his ground, calmly watching as the monster rolled several feet to the side of him, continuing forward until it crashed into the wall beyond.

*[I have... isolated the Eyes in the Bloom's mind... but I need you to appreciate... how difficult this is.]*

I looked up to the ceiling and saw the remaining Eyes clutching to vines or falling from the air, their bodies and eyestalks twisting under Grotto's mental attack. It was an eery sight, as neither Grotto nor the Eyes made any sound during their psychic struggle.

But that confirmed the core assumption our entire strategy relied on. Kill the Eyes, blind the hive. Nuralie had already pegged one of the agonized Eyes with an arrow, and I pulled out a pair of daggers from my inventory.

"Always wanted to do this," I said as I used *Homing Weapon* to hurl the blades.

I had no idea if I could throw a dagger hard enough to count as a Strength attack, so the bonus I got from *Nimean Weapon* that made all of my Strength attacks count as magical unless I chose otherwise might not apply.

I doubted the same attack would do anything to the Hands, who almost certainly had mundane damage resistance from their Fortitude or otherwise, and the daggers weren't even throwing knives. Just regular daggers for stabbin' and slashin', preferably in the dead of night while wearing a tattered and hooded cloak.

The Eyes were *not* Grade four monsters, however. They were Grade none, which meant they were about as tough as bats from the way the technique-launched daggers tore through their Jack Russel Terrier-sized bodies. One even got beamed by the hilt of the dagger, rather than the blade—which makes sense, it's a fifty-fifty chance and the fact that so many shows and movies have people landing knife throws one hundred percent of the time kind of irks me. Anyway, it hit hard enough to splatter the roof with the Eye's guts.

It was exactly as satisfying as I thought it would be. Who needed talent when you could just throw resources at the problem? That must be how rich people felt. Well, at this point I *was* a rich person, so it was how at least one rich person felt.

With three Eyes left, Nuralie finished off the one still perched on the ceiling, and I heard an awful squish, turning to see Etja stomping on one that had fallen. Her bare foot was covered in ichor, and my brain forced me to imagine what that felt like between the toes.

*[I have seen and felt many things in my long existence. Nothing has ever made me feel so disgusted as the thought you just had, and I don't even have toes.]*

[I am not responsible for my thought-crimes,] I thought back at Grotto as Varrin found and boot-murdered the last Eye.

The ignited ultra-sea star righted itself and began to wheel around again but toward no one in particular. Shog finally finished dismembering his opponent, spreading his arms and tentacles out and unleashing an otherworldly victory cry. The other two lay dead, wounds no longer oozing thick blood, and the floor was littered with the slain Eyes, arrows sticking out of most of them.

The Bloom was an alien creature with unknowable thoughts and feelings—other than to Grotto, I supposed—but I could tell it was deeply troubled by what had unfolded. The roots pulled at my ankles with increasing urgency, but they were easy enough to kick off when there weren't thousand-pound jumbo gymnasts with as many hands trying to grab you up or lay a smackdown. The center bloom swung its body in all directions, spraying deadly mist into the air and creating a skin-melting deterrent for anyone dumb enough to approach it. It even vomited up the half-dissolved Praying Head, like a threatened snake.

Nuralie paced up beside me. She sighed and held out a hand. I placed a fresh quiver in it, and she set it on the ground, then produced a large jar with a milky-yellow liquid inside and broke the wax seal around the top. Nuralie gingerly took off the lid and made sure it was stable, tucked in between the roots, before dipping an arrow in it. At last, she drew it back and aimed at the Bloom.

“What’s that?” I asked, nodding at the jar.

“Weedkiller,” she said. “I use it in my greenhouse.”

She loosed the arrow and it struck the Bloom, which whirled in our direction, spraying a fresh cloud of mist.

“You keep a greenhouse?”

Dip. Pull. Loose. Thud.

“It’s for alchemy.” Pause. “And my frogs.”

“And you just keep that in your inventory?”

She raised an eyeridge at me as she nocked another arrow.

“Where do you keep all *your* stuff?”

“Fair point.”

Loose. Thud. Plant-rage.

“How do you know it’ll work on that thing?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“If it doesn’t, you can throw something heavy at it,” she said.

The Bloom didn’t look like it was winding up for another jetstream of death, so I was betting it only had the one good shot with that attack. It may have needed to refill its venom sacs. *Poison* sacs? It’s not like it had fangs or a stinger... either way, we were safe for the moment.

“I’d hate to spend more stamina if I don’t have to.”

Dip. Draw.

“This is why I like alchemy.” Loose. Thud. “I have as much as I can prepare.”

Thirty arrows later, and the Bloom sagged to one side, no longer pumping out mist, and Nuralie gave it another ten or so plant-killer arrows for good measure. The rest of us did post-combat cleanup and recovery while Nuralie slowly ensured the monster's doom, and while we waited to make sure the air wouldn't liquefy our lungs. Finally, we began the process of *carefully* dismembering the entity to reach the sub-obelisk inside of it. Everything wet inside of the creature was acidic, and everything inside of it was wet.

Nuralie again proved invaluable for this process, since she had her acid-proof gloves and a resistant smock for her alchemy. I used a halberd, which I discarded halfway through when the steel dissolved, and then a poleaxe, which also made its way into the junk pile by the time we finished.

My armory was taking a serious hit in this fight. The head of the battleaxe I'd been throwing had broken, the spear was a pile of ash, and one dagger had pinned its victim to the vined ceiling while the other was lost to space and time and not worth looking for in the mess of a room.

I *did* get the team involved in recovering *Arbitros* from beneath the Hand it was buried. That one wasn't mine to lose, since it was on loan from Lito.

Finally, we did some vigorous rinsing from our collective waterskins and canteens, which Nuralie assured us had only a twenty percent chance of causing a violent reaction that released yet more gas with a pH lower than my granny used to drop it on the dance floor. We placed our hands on the obelisk and channeled mana to undo the second lock.

"It's interesting," said Xim. "The obelisk is completely unharmed, despite being inside that thing."

{A little bit of divinely-attuned, flesh-and-steel-dissolving acid wouldn't hurt one of these obelisks,} Cage thought to us. {They're tougher than that!}

"And you were worried about my explosion spell?"

{Not really! Just trying to be encouraging. Go get 'em, big mage guy! Er, big... *tank* guy! Wait, what role are you trying to be?}

"I'm a-"

"We should move on," said Varrin. "This already took us longer than I'd like."

"True," I said. "We'll have to make do with the resources we've recovered."

Xim had taken Nuralie's final mana potion while we worked, and the rest of the effect on Etja's had run its course as well. Xim had a smaller mana pool, so hers was now looking fairly healthy, but Etja was only back to a third.

I'd taken a break back out in the hall to keep Shog around, where the Divine mana interference ended. Walk into the room, divine interference. Step out of the room, mega-mana regen. It was like a game of 'the floor is lava', and the logic of it was just as sensible.

{Wards!} was the extent of Cage's input on the matter.

I was glad that I had one ability that used stamina rather than mana, since I was close to empty on the latter when we left the subchamber. Everything we'd done so far was just to unlock the 'door' to the central Cage. I hoped we still had enough juice for whatever we found behind it.