

{The Mouth is *definitely* in the subchamber,} Cage thought to us.

“Is there a reason,” I said, “that you’re withholding critical information until the last second?”

{It goes against my nature to help Delvers overcome a Delve. This is all a vvvvvvery new experience for me. Besides, this isn’t the last *second*! It’ll take another couple of minutes for you to jog there.}

“I refuse to believe you’re *that* literal,” I said. “You want this Delve to collapse or not? If not, we’re going to need better cooperation from you.”

{Look, eighty-three percent of my processing power is being used to direct the mana-overload mitigation functions, ten percent is being spent trying to repair the mana-weaves everywhere I can, and six percent is going toward managing the normal Delve functions. You guys are getting one percent. One percent!}

“That feels low,” said Xim.

{It’s proportioned based on the probability that the managed solution will result in a favorable outcome.}

“Good to know you have faith in us,” I said. “Anything else you can tell us?”

{Don’t get too close to the main baddie in the next chamber. It looks like it’s dissolving things. Very slowly, though. One of the Praying Heads is inside of it and just screaming and screaming.}

I grimaced, then looked at Xim and Varrin.

“Are all Delves complete horror shows?”

“No,” said Xim. “Coppers are kind of pleasant from what I hear.”

“Not how I would describe them, Xim,” said Varrin. “Safer to assume it will always be a gruesome endeavor.”

“Why did I ask that?” I muttered. “Never mind, let’s go.”

We continued down the corridor, though at a more careful pace. We encountered no more Eyes until we found the entrance to the chamber. The sounds of shrieking echoed down the hallway.

Nuralie went to scout and returned with enough information that it made me wonder if Cage was secretly trying to sabotage us. I gave him the benefit of the doubt and assumed he was just bad at communicating.

“The chamber is much smaller,” said Nuralie. “Everything is covered in flesh-plants.”

“Flesh-plants?” I said. “Can you be more specific?”

“The walls, floor, and ceiling are covered in plants.” Pause. “Made of flesh.”

I nodded. I hadn’t expected poetry, but maybe I needed to buy Nuralie a thesaurus. I gestured for her to continue.

“There are four Hands, nineteen Eyes, and something called a Bloom of Consumption at the center. Lesser Aberration, Grade Two.”

“Then the hands are the real threat,” I said. “They’re all grade four.”

“The Hands stuffed the Praying Head into the Bloom,” said Nuralie. “The Bloom sprayed it with mist and its skin fell off.”

“Calling it a Bloom really diverges from the theme here.”

“Regardless of what it’s called,” said Varrin, “that sounds like the mouth.”

“The Eyes scout for prey,” said Xim, “the Hands grab it, and the Bloom eats it.”

“So what’s our strategy?” I asked.

“Kill the Eyes,” said Nuralie.

“Any reason other than you hate being watched?”

“The Hands don’t have eyes. The Bloom doesn’t have eyes.” Pause. “Only the Eyes have eyes.”

“You think that’ll blind it.” Nuralie nodded. “Ok. Nuralie, you’ve been taking the Eyes out so far, so you should focus on that. The Bloom is a threat if we get close, so we need to avoid getting grabbed.” I couldn’t help but look at Varrin as I said this.

“Not helpful,” he said, scowling.

“I doubt my brand of letting everything hit me will help here,” I said. “My Fortitude doesn’t help with getting grappled, and I’d rather not see how effective it is against getting dissolved.”

“You’re still the strongest,” said Nuralie.

“Sure, but stronger than two or three of *those* things? I don’t like the chances. Ideally, we’d disable one or two of them and focus down the others. Nuralie, you’ve got those paralytic arrows I gave you. Anyone else have some crowd control?”

“I can stun,” said Xim, “but not for long. It’s mostly to make room for a follow-up attack.”

“I’ll aim for the limbs,” said Varrin.

“I am eager to test myself against one of these creatures,” Shog said, tentacles snaking through the air. ***“We will see who can strangle the other first.”***

“Didn’t see a neck to strangle on one of these, Shog.”

“I will make it work.”

I looked Shog up and down. Despite his size, he was still a good bit smaller than one of the Hands. Then again, his grade was one higher. He might be able to solo one. If it didn’t work out, well he wasn’t a core party member.

“Shog, if you die here, do you die in real life?”

“This *is* real life,” said Varrin.

“I am no specter. My true body is before you. Any harm I suffer will endure if I am dismissed.”

Even if I were willing to throw Shog’s life away, he was still a huge asset. I’d rather not have him fed to the Bloom, so he’d be around to help out with anything else we encountered afterward. It might also be good to have him available for future summoning. The Devil you know and all that. I resolved to dismiss him if it looked like he were in mortal danger.

“Etja?” I turned to the golem. “Think you can make one of the Hands float?”

She wrung her fingers.

“They’re pretty big,” she said. “Maybe if it’s all I’m doing.”

I considered the abilities in front of me and worked out an approach.

“That should be good enough.”

The plan would rely a lot on Nuralie, but I had faith in the Loson. We readied ourselves, then marched toward the fight.

The chamber was the size of the infield area of a baseball diamond, less than a hundred feet across and deep, with an arched ceiling around the same height at its center. Unlike the rest of the Delve, which pulsed with blue light from the mana-woven runes, this space was dominated by an amethyst glow.

Gnarled brambles covered the walls and ceilings, cutting off some of the light from the mana-weaves. Beneath was a thin membranous layer of slick growth that curled up in places like dying leaves. The light of the runes penetrated from beneath, blue light passing through the dark red flesh to create the dim purple lighting. The Eyes clung to the brambles with their boneless legs and turned their eyestalks to gaze at me as I entered.

The floor was buried under a tangled mass of thick, veiny roots that slowly moved from side to side like worms on wet concrete. My eyes traced them to the center of the room, where the Bloom lay.

It was as tall as one of the starfish monsters, but twice as wide. Its form was that of a flower that had yet to open, large and round at the bottom and narrowing toward the top where several layers of flesh wrapped over one another. Steaming liquid dripped from between the folds, and hissed when it made contact with what little of the ground was exposed. On either side of it, two super-sized Hands sat in their closed-up form, each with a hundred pairs of small-fry hands held together in supplication, almost like the monsters were praying to the Bloom.

From within the Bloom, the screaming continued.

“Is the sub-obelisk inside that shit?” I said as the Hands began to open up and spread their limbs.

{It is! Try not to blow it up.}

“That spell’s on cooldown.”

{Oh, good! Wait, no, not good.}

I ignored Cage and walked deeper into the room, stepping carefully over the wiggling terrain. My goal was not to draw first blood in this fight but to give one of the Hands a sneaky surprise instead.

Varrin and Xim stood to my right just behind me, with Shog floating to my left. Etja was directly behind us, and Nuralie disappeared into the gloom as I waved my hand at the... Hands.

"Hi!" I said. "I'm from the Home Owner's Association. Some of the neighbors have complained about your lawn, and seeing it for myself, I gotta say their concerns are justified."

The Hands turned and began their macabre cartwheel toward me.

"I'm happy to give you the number of a landscaper. I got a guy that weeds my own yard if you'd like to speak with him." The Hands picked up speed as they got closer. "Otherwise, we're going to have to fine you."

The first Hand made it to me, swinging down with one limb, thicker than my torso. I brought up *Gracovus*, and the ghostly atrocildile sprang from its surface and roared as the appendage struck. The blow smashed the shield down onto me, sending a bolt of pain along my arm as I struggled to stay on my feet.

HP: 367 -> 357

That triggered an ability I hadn't been taking proper advantage of.

***I Don't Attack You, You Attack Me:* So long as you did not attack first, an enemy becomes stunned for one second the first time they deal damage to you with a physical attack. An enemy who has triggered this ability will become vulnerable to it again at the next dawn.**

The entire body of the Hand seized up, and Shog'tuatha rushed in.

The c'thon reached out with his feathered tentacles and coiled them around three of the starfish's arms, then began carving apart the grasping hands along its face with his razor claws. I spun out from beneath the fight to face the next Hand tumbling its way toward me.

That one repeated the same mistake as the first, although it bashed me in the side before I could get my shield up. It knocked me down onto the roots, but the monster froze from my ability.

HP: 357 -> 332

Xim lunged forward, her shield glowing with divine light, and bashed the creature, which chained her own stun with mine. Varrin followed up with a series of devastating strikes from his greatsword on one of the creature's limbs, and soon sappy blood was pouring down its nearly severed leg.

The third Hand was on top of me as I tried to stand from my prone position, the roots at my feet curling up and around my legs. A split second before the new enemy crushed me, I felt my entire body grow lighter, and the large creature began hovering off the ground. It still got a good slap at my head as it spun in the air, but without the weight of its body behind the attack, it was glancing.

HP: 332 -> 330

Still enough for my ability to trigger, and the second of stun gave Etja room to force it further from the ground. Her mana bar ticked down as she maintained the spell, but if that's all she did this fight, it would be worth it.

The fourth Hand was distracted by suddenly becoming a pincushion. Five arrows were dug into its torso, and another shot out from the edge of the dark room, burying itself next to the rest.

Even with my enhanced eyesight, I couldn't make out Nuralie in the gloom, but several of the flying Eyes were turned in the direction her arrows came from. If all the little creatures did was see shit, it would make sense for their vision to be better than mine.

With the other three Hands busy, I cast *Shortcut* to appear in front of the one Nuralie was engaging, before it had the chance to reorient itself toward the hidden archer. I got its attention by activating *Nimean Weapon* and slamming it in a leg with the spike of my hammer.

The spike dug into the flesh, then *Oblivion Orb* cast from the tip of the weapon while it was buried inside, taking a grapefruit-sized chunk out of the muscle. The humanoid hands near the wound grabbed at the hammerhead as the limb faltered, but I wrenched it free, breaking fingers and ripping one hand off entirely.

The nightmare echinoderm swung a limb at me, fingers and hands reaching out, but the half-dozen paralytic arrows slowed its movement. I stepped back to avoid the strike, but roots grabbed at my ankles and I stumbled, tumbling to the ground as the limb whipped through the air where I'd been. The Hand quickly reoriented itself and smashed an arm down onto my body. My ribs creaked as I lost another chunk of HP, and the beast grappled me with dozens of its smaller, grabby hands.

HP: 330 -> 295

The roots released my ankles and I was lifted off the ground. The world spun as the Hand cartwheeled back toward the Bloom with me attached to the inside of one leg. I brought out my *Wand of Piercing Force* and began rapid-casting the attack spell. Sap spilled from the monster, but it cartwheeled away, the wounds doing little other than making it more unstable than it already was. Soon, I was out of charges, and the bulbous mass of the central creature whirled in and out of my vision. I watched it open up, the fleshy flaps unfolding into a form like a fully blossomed rose.

At the center of the Bloom was a wide, gummy mouth full of thick liquid, and a half-digested Praying Head, the bone of its skull visible through melted flesh.

I let the Hand bring me closer and closer until the Bloom was only a couple cartwheels away. The Bloom shuddered, and a cloud of red mist began to spray from its mouth toward me.

I cast *Shortcut*, trying to aim for the general direction of the rest of the fight.

Unfortunately, trying to activate a short-range teleport while being rotated at vomit-inducing speeds made my accuracy a bit shit. I decided to speak with Nuralie about inventing Dramamine as I appeared thirty feet from the fight, seven feet off the ground, and at an angle that allowed me the familiar experience of falling on my face.

At least I hadn't been *thrown* this time. Seriously, there had to be a better way to deal with giant enemies than getting grabbed and tossed around, hoping for the best.

While I hadn't been able to teleport my way back into the fray, the accidental distance gave me a good view of the overall battle.

Varrin and Xim were playing a lethal game of tag with their target. While their initial combo had done serious damage to one of the Hand's limbs, the monster was only slowed. It was still able to turn on its side and cartwheel at its prey, but the motion was jerky and the thing had trouble turning. Varrin was able to duck to the side and carve a gash down its back, while Xim led it on a merry chase. She stumbled as the roots caught her ankles, but was able to dive aside as the crippled Hand drew close.

Shog's fight had deteriorated into the strangest bit of ground wrestling I've ever seen. The monster starfish had tried to cartwheel while Shog's tentacles wrapped three of its arms, but the c'thon pulled it off balance, sending them both to the ground. The Hand now lay on top of Shog, who struggled to make room to strike with his claws as hundreds of the lesser hands squeezed his feelers and tore away fistfuls of feathers. One little hand was even poking Shog in his big black eyes with manic aggression.

Etja's jaw was clenched and her arms trembled as she held them out toward the Hand she was levitating. Her mana was below a quarter, which I math'd out to mean the enemy would be set free and Etja would be juiced in another minute or so.

Nuralie was making headway taking out the Eyes with her archery, but the winged creatures had gotten wise to her attacks and were now swooping and fluttering through the air, dodging her arrows. There were at least a dozen left, and I doubted Etja would last long enough for Nuralie to hit all of her targets.

The Hand near the Bloom turned and began stiffly cartwheeling back toward me, as the Bloom itself turned its goopy mouth in Nuralie's direction, the Loson having abandoned stealth once she realized the enemy could still see her. She was near the far wall, forty feet from the Bloom, so she wasn't threatened by its mist, but I didn't like what I was seeing. Why would the mouth turn toward Nuralie, unless it was going to *do* something? It didn't have eyes on its main body, so it's not like it was watching her.

If taking out the Eyes *did* blind the entire entity, then we needed to make that happen faster. We needed more ranged firepower, and Etja was busy.

I could swap out with Etja, but I could barely keep *one* Hand busy, much less two. I didn't have a good build for this fight, aside from giving one Hand the runaround while I teleported. Even then, I could only do that four more times before I was out of mana as well.

The Bloom began to swell as it continued to point itself at Nuralie.

I began sprinting in her direction, but my footing was hampered by the grasping roots. The Hand also rolled at me and would intercept before long. The moment before we collided, I cast *Shortcut* to close as much distance as I could between myself and Nuralie, but my aim was thrown off as a root wrenched my ankle. I wound up several feet away from my target, which was a point directly between the Bloom and Nuralie.

The Bloom's body contracted, and a stream of liquid shot out at the Loson.

I threw out my arm and detached *Gracorvus*, sending it through the air and into the way of the spray. The goop sizzled and hissed as it made contact, and the force of the spray sent droplets scattering across my body. Smoke poured off my armor where it was struck, and a few droplets hit my face. It felt like molten steel hitting my skin, causing me to reactively claw at my mug, but all that did was get some of the liquid on my fingers, my nerve endings screaming in protest.

HP: 295 -> 285

Paralysis: 10

Toxicity: 7

Even I would have been in trouble if that attack struck me head-on. Grade Two my ass.

The Bloom pointed its mouth back to the sky, and I hoped it only had enough juice to do that once. The Hand I'd teleported away from was already rolling at me again. Etja's mana continued to tick down, Varrin and Xim stumbled as they fought, nearly getting grabbed, Shog bellowed eldritch curses as he was smothered, and Grotto...

Grotto was hovering in the air, watching the fight.

[Grotto! Wanna help out here, bud?!]

[*The Hands have no minds from what I can tell. Nor do the Eyes.*]

[And the fucking Bloom?]

[*It is like touching on the consciousness of dozens of individuals, rather than one entity.*]

The semi-paralyzed Hand struggled to spin toward me as I tore my feet free from the roots. Grotto's statement made me realize something that should have been obvious.

[It's a fucking hive monster! Try and isolate the Eyes inside its hivemind and get them to stop dodging!]

[*That is much more difficult than you real-*]

[I don't give a shit, figure it out!]

I watched the approaching Hand, wishing I had a better ranged option.

"Fuck it," I spat, deciding to try a hail mary. I pulled the one-handed steel warhammer from my inventory and brought it up over my head like a throwing axe. I cast *Nimean Weapon*, priming an *Oblivion Orb*, then chucked the hammer with all my strength. The weapon shot through the air, turning end over end as it sailed toward its target.

It went wide, landing several feet to the side of the advancing monster. I probably should have tried the move with the actual axes I had, rather than a fucking hammer. I pulled another steel weapon out, an axe this time, and cast *Nimean Weapon* again. I needed to be able to hit these things from a distance. As I reared back for a second toss, the Hand only a couple cartwheels away from me, I got a System message.

Would you like to learn the technique, Homing Weapon?

Homing Weapon

Cost: 10 Stamina

I didn't have time to read the rest of the message. I accepted the skill, hoping that it was what I thought it was. I focused on the technique and layered it on with *Nimean Weapon*, then flung the axe.

The weapon flew through the air, looking like it was also going to go wide like my hammer, but it not only course-corrected, it *picked up more speed*. The axe buried itself up to the handle in the approaching starfish, and I heard the familiar *pop!* of *Oblivion Orb* going off.

I guess throwing shit really hard *did* count as a Strength attack.

Not only that, but the axe tore itself from the wound and zipped back at me. As the axe traveled through the air, the already partially paralyzed mega-starfish cartwheeled onto the leg where eight inches of axehead and a citrus-fruit-sized dimensional tear had mangled the muscle, in addition to the wounds I inflicted with my wand.

It buckled.

The pentamerall beast lost its balance and hit the ground hard. I heard the crunching of dozens of fingerbones as the smaller hands on its body were crushed by its enormous weight. The axe whipped back and slapped into the palm of my hand.

As the monster tried to right itself, my eyes turned back to the air, where ten surviving Eyes dodged Nuralie's arrows.

Time for some target practice.