

Chunks fell away from the ceiling above, crumbling down on us like the ancient structure had suddenly felt the weight of its age and given up. Hunks of stone, some larger than the Lardigrey, crashed to the ground as we all strafed and dove to avoid being crushed. We were all heavily resistant to mundane damage, but no one wanted to test how effective that was against the tons of rock threatening to squash us.

Fortunately, we all had the benefit of maxed-out training stats in Agility and Speed, which adjusted the difficulty of avoiding the largest slabs from impossible to demanding. Too much fell for us to avoid everything—aside from Varrin, who wove through the debris with the speed and grace of a gazelle made of neoprene rubber. I grunted as a cantaloupe-sized piece of rubble collided with a pauldron. My armor absorbed the brunt of the impact, but the force told me enough to keep out of the way of the largest fragments.

A rain of gravel plinked and clattered across my body as I leaped to one side to avoid a scrap the size of a cow. It impacted the soft dirt with a low thunk, kicking up clods of soil to mix in with the growing haze of rock dust beginning to cloud the air. Shog's tentacles whipped around him, knocking aside anything smaller than a basketball while flitting between the larger pieces. Xim had Grotto tucked beneath her round shield, protecting the core, who was likely our most vulnerable team member.

The destruction began at the center of the room, directly above the obelisk, and rippled outward. After ten perilous seconds, the middle of the ceiling had fully disintegrated. I scrambled over uneven terrain to reach the area, which was now free of shedding boulders, finding Nuralie and Shog already there. Xim and Grotto were close behind, with Xim hunched over and enduring several fist-size pieces striking her back. Varrin slashed through a rock falling toward Etja, and the pair moved out of harm's way as well, putting the whole party inside the safe zone.

A quick glance at my interface showed that no one had lost more than a few points of health, and I looked up, curious to see what had been revealed beyond the shattered ceiling. Less than twenty feet above where the original ceiling had been was another enclosure, but this one was distinct from anything I'd seen inside of a Delve before.

Rather than plain stone or dark, rune-covered metal, the new ceiling was a sprawling network of endless gears and cogs. They were hardly visible in the rapidly dwindling glow of the bioluminescent plants, which were quickly becoming buried. I peered through the dark, using my enhanced vision to study the intricate web of unmoving machinery as the cacophony of destruction resounded for another full minute, the walls crashing down in a final crescendo of demolition. Finally, silence filled the space, broken by the occasional tumble of unsettled pebbles.

Amid the smaller ratchets and wheels were larger gears interspersed at regular intervals. They brought order to the otherwise chaotic mess of interwoven hardware. There were at least a hundred, each one bearing a symbol engraved onto the hub at its center. Most were unfamiliar, and many were obscured by the dark, but I recognized a few from my practice with mana weaving. Heat, cold, pierce, spirit; they were basic forms of the fundamental building blocks of runework.

I took them in at a glance as I searched for threats in the enlarged space. Everything was silent and still, but a form dominated one side of the room, the dull glint of metal barely visible in the dark. It was a shadowy mass the size of a two-story house. The moment I'd looked it over, it began emitting a low hum, followed by ticking clinks that rapidly grew in tempo.

One of the large gears above us groaned and came to life.

It rotated with stops and starts, its movements jerky and uneven as it dislodged a torrent of soot and rust. As the offscourings joined the settling stone dust, the movements of the gear smoothed out until it squeaked and spun at a consistent pace. After a few seconds, it moved as though it were freshly oiled, and the rune on its face came to life. Once it began burning with a ruby glow, it wasn't hard to make out what it said.

Mind.

Veins of mana pulsed out from the gear in an irregular pattern of sharp lines and hard angles. They spread across the entire mass of gears, the smaller cogs beginning to turn as energy passed through them. Soon the sound of clanking metal and drumming mechanisms banished the tenuous silence with the roar of a factory in full swing. The room was lit up in a color that reminded me of red emergency lighting.

Fierce jets of steam began to burst from a few spots in the ground, firing in brief spurts powerful enough to clear the rubble above them. Smaller rocks were sent flying so high it was as though they sought to reclaim their place in the ceiling, but the insistence of gravity brought them back down to add organic pops to the mechanical racket as they landed.

The geometric mana made its way to the dark form at the edge of the room and its body lit up with yellow bulbs crackling with electricity. It was a mess of brass tubes and rotating side rods. On its front was a clock with a 30-foot diameter, all hands pointing to 12 o'clock, but there were no numbers on its face. A hundred runes matching the gears above lined the clock's edge.

“What am I looking at?” asked Xim. She hefted her scepter, stance low, eyes flitting about in search of something to smite.

“Some kind of steampunk nightmare,” I said, also looking for an obvious boss monster. “Honestly, the theme is completely out of step with the other Delves we’ve been through.”

“Weren’t you complaining about Delves being too repetitive?” said Xim.

“I was talking about architecture. This is still the same, just with gears and shit.”

“Perhaps it’s a different type of challenge,” said Varrin. “Something other than a mana fiend to slay.”

The ‘second’ hand on the clock began to tick, and it ticked *fast*. It clicked past ten runes in one second, which gave us a ten-second countdown to whatever happened next. I could guess as to what.

“I think the gears each have a different effect,” I said. “The one that activated first was labeled Mind, and that brought everything else to life. I suspect once the second hand makes its way around, it’ll-”

The hand finished a rotation, and the minute hand clicked over to the first rune: Weight. A gear above us began to spin, its rune lighting up.

My knees bent as my body grew to twice heavier and Nuralie grunted as she recovered from the sudden increase as well. Varrin and Xim were hardly affected, while Shog lost a few feet of elevation before adjusting and hovering back up, halfway to the ceiling. Grotto was still tucked behind Xim’s shield, but his feelers bobbed. Rocks shifted and clunked as the balance in the piles of debris was disrupted.

“...add a new effect,” I finished.

“An endurance test?” asked Varrin.

“I don’t want to stand around and find out.”

“We could break that big clock,” said Xim.

“Or break everything,” Nuralie offered.

“If we keep getting heavier,” said Etja, “I can use Siphon to counter it.”

The minute hand turned over to a new rune, and another gear began to turn. The temperature in the room skyrocketed. Within a second I could feel sweat forming on my skin, and I cursed myself for not taking the time to put environmental weaves onto my armor. Not that I'd had time to do so.

"Etja, try and use Nullify on one of the gears," I said. "Shog, see if you can break one. I'm heading toward the clock."

Etja and Shog each flew to a different gear and I trundled over the piles of broken stone toward the large machine. After a few feet, I swapped to flying over the terrain with Gracovus. There wasn't time to conserve my mana by fighting with my footing.

Etja fired Nullify at the heat gear and the rune on its face dimmed. The temperature in the room began to abate, but much slower than it had spiked. Shog made it to the weight gear and struck it with his bone greatsword. Sparks flew, but the gear continued to turn. The c'thon growled and swung again, rotating his body and putting all his weight behind it. The gear hitched, gravity returning to normal for a brief moment, but immediately began to move once more. I could barely make out a scratch on the gear's surface. A few seconds later, the gear Etja had Nullified lit back up and began to spin. The heat in the room rose.

The minute hand ticked, and the vents of steam erupting from the ground multiplied.

A vent fired from beneath me and I shot into the air. I felt my skin blister beneath my armor as the heat found its way between the plates and joints. I quickly course-corrected and made it the rest of the way to the giant clock, doing a quick flyby of its perimeter, looking for anything of note. Large side rods turned over metal wheels half-buried in its mass and I could see innumerable moving parts through slats in the outer housing. I heard the plink of arrows as Nuralie tried her hand at destroying a gear, but none of the effects abated. After I'd swung around the three exposed sides of the machine, Varrin appeared beside me.

The minute hand turned, and lightning began to crawl through the room, arcing from floor to ceiling. I turned to see Shog take a bolt, scorched feathers shedding from one of his feelers. He looked more annoyed than injured, but a swath of flesh was blackened.

"It looks like there's a lot of sensitive moving parts inside," I said. Varrin nodded and immediately drew back to take a swing with Kazandak. He swung with enough force to send a sharp thrum through the air and his blade bit deep into the metal, though it was just shy of penetrating. He swung again, managing to cut a little deeper, but he wasn't making much progress.

I dropped down from Gracovus and grew Somnres to a full two-handed form, then swung at the machine with full force. I left a deep dent in the machine's surface, but it was hardly a scuff compared to the device's surface area. I jumped across broken rocks to the clock face and took a swing at it instead. A shimmering wall of force rippled as my strike impacted a barrier, leaving the clock face unharmed.

Another tick and a dark fog began to pour out from the slats in the large machine. A burst of vapor hit me directly in the face, and voices began to whisper into my ears.

"Wait, all you have to do is wait, take time and stop to think, wait, wait, wait," they hissed.

Now, when strange, unseen entities begin giving me unsolicited advice in the creepiest way imaginable, I tend to ignore them. I felt a subtle tug on my mind as the voices encouraged me to ignore my problems, but I resisted it without much trouble. Varrin, on the other hand, had stopped his attack and was shaking his head sharply.

"Mental attack," I said, giving him a strong clap on the back. "You got this."

He blinked a few times, then nodded and began his attack anew. With each strike, he grew faster, his blows more powerful, and his body was shrouded in growing divine light. Whatever this machine was, it counted as an enemy, and Varrin's wombo combo of buffs and blessings was beginning to build. The metal plating in front of him was nearly shredded, the shifting machinery beneath exposed.

I raised a hand for him to pause, then hefted Somnres and swung in with an Oblivion Orb-powered attack. The moving gears of metal glowed when my attack landed, the Oblivion Orb leaving a thousand small holes in the material. The hammer strike left a dent, but overall the attack had been lackluster. There was a loud clunking as the metallic plates and gears continued to move, but it made no noticeable difference in its overall operation.

Another tick and tendrils of barbed wire crawled out from between the broken stones at my feet, wrapping themselves around my legs. A bolt of lightning struck my armor, locking up my muscles for an instant and preventing me from moving to escape the grasping strands. A spray of venting steam hit me from below. My joints screamed as the force of the blast pressed me upward while the razor wire dug scores into my armor and locked my legs in place. When the blast of steam stopped, I fell to my knees under my body's increased weight.

Sweat poured down my back as the voices grew louder.

"Fuck."