

I used Oblivion Orb to destroy the wire and disentangle my legs, doing my best to ignore the insistent voices. I hopped back onto Gracovus and checked on my allies.

The wire embraced Varrin's entire lower half, but the big guy ignored it, swinging at the machine with ever-increasing haste. The moving plates were shredded after a dozen strikes, and their movement stopped. The gears above continued to turn and none of the effects ended, but Varrin never paused to check, he just kept swinging.

Everyone else was still fighting to destroy the gears on the ceiling. The best any of them could manage was an interruption, but all it did was give us a few seconds of relief from one of the hazards. There was a flash of crimson as Xim tested Judgment on one of the cogs. Divine fire clung to the gear's surface but it continued to spin.

I looked back at the clock face. Varrin's efforts had destroyed a small fraction of the machine that I could see, and I searched the timepiece for any hint that it had been the right move.

The second hand ticked relentlessly, the minute hand turned another notch, and waves of screeching sound began rolling across the room. My armor shuddered as the harsh squeal pierced my ears.

Another bolt of lightning struck me, and I barely flew out of the way of a vent. I'd taken less than 10% of my health in damage, but my allies had much smaller health pools. Xim shifted her focus from damage to healing, holding her hands out towards one party member at a time to cast Heal at range. For now, she could rotate through everyone without trouble, but her mana would only last so long.

Varrin had ramped up to making several attacks a second, and a mass of exposed springs and cogs shattered under his onslaught. He stepped forward into a hole he'd carved, his powerful legs ripping up the wire trying to hinder him as he stepped, his heavy armor protecting him from the sharp protrusions.

I kept watching the clock face, trying to decide if I should begin channeling Explosion! and pack a massive detonation inside the hole Varrin had made. The compressed space would make it significantly more effective, but that came with a cost. I'd picked up an evolution to lower the spell's cooldown, but the reduction was based on my skill level in Physical Magic, which was low. It would take 52 minutes to get the spell back, and if we were forced into another boss immediately after this it wouldn't be available. There was also the chance that we would be rushing into *two* more bosses, each of which would presumably be more dangerous than this one. I wanted to hold it back as a trump card.

I watched the second hand tick past as I debated how much I wanted to commit. I wasn't sure if I imagined it, but it looked like the hand was moving the slightest bit slower. Attacking the gears wasn't getting us anywhere. Even if I was mistaken, it was time to swap tactics.

"Everyone focus on helping Varrin!" I shouted.

My words were lost in the screech, which continued to cause everything in the room to tremble. The screech had become more of a loud ringing, however. I realized that I wasn't hearing the screech anymore. I'd been completely deafened. The only sound I could hear beyond the ree of aggravated tinnitus was the whispering voices. I looked at Varrin to find blood dripping from beneath his helm, evidencing his own deafness. His eyes were bloodshot as he manically carved away, ignoring any alarm the lack of hearing might be causing him.

The rest of the party didn't need to hear my directions, however. The move was obvious. Etja was already flying towards us but was waylaid by a lightning bolt and a blast of steam. Her body lit up as Xim tossed her a Heal while moving carefully over the rocky terrain below. She carried Nuralie on her back, keeping the loson out of reach of the grasping wire. Like Varrin, Xim's Strength allowed her to power through the obstacle, shredding and snapping the metal strands as she stepped. However, her armor was lighter than Varrin's and she was forced to Heal herself or risk losing a leg. Shog shot through the air toward the massive machine, bringing both greatswords down and creating a small shockwave. He left sizable dents but failed to penetrate.

When Etja pulled up, I pointed at the hole Varrin continued to carve. There was no way we could destroy everything on the surface of the machine, but we *could* dig into its center. Hopefully, the deeper we went, the more sensitive shit there was to break.

Another tick and a tornado formed at the room's center, sucking everything toward it.

Rocks shot through the air, only to be ejected with monstrous force as the whirlwind churned. I clung to Gracovus, resisting the pull while floating up to grab Etja by the arm. She was holding herself steady with her gravity magic, and I hoped to take some of the strain off and reduce the drain to her mana. Xim dropped Nuralie and stood behind her, keeping the lighter woman from being sucked away as Grotto clung to the cleric's shield arm. The grasping wires snaked up Nuralie's legs, easily piercing her leathers and drawing deep gashes.

Nuralie began firing arrows into the hole Varrin made, narrowly avoiding the warrior. Their tips released a caustic liquid that bubbled on contact with the material, allowing Varrin's sword to cut through it more easily. Kazandak was a masterwork sword created

by Varrin's grandfather, one of the most heralded blacksmiths in Hiward. While Nuralie's acid was potent enough to eat through mana-enhanced metals, it would take something a lot more potent to damage Kazandak's blade.

Nuralie's arrows flew with enough force to overcome the enhanced gravity and the violent wind, but I could tell she was straining as she drew her bow back to its limit with each shot. She was also suffering through constant damage from the barbed wire as it made its way to her torso, but Xim continued to rotate Heal.

Lightning struck us with increasing frequency. My muscles spasmed as a bolt arced to my back and I nearly lost my grip on Gracovus, feeling myself slide toward the whirlwind at the room's center. The electricity traveled to Etja through my hand, but her body glowed blue as her mana shield ate the damage. She gritted her teeth and began firing a constant beam of disintegration into the hole.

Shog saw what was happening and abandoned his futile attempts to carve up his own section of the monstrous machine, instead taking my place to keep Etja steady. I gave the c'thon a silent thanks, then flew forward into the hole.

The ground at Varrin's feet was covered in broken metal and each strike released new scraps. The tornado had the unexpected benefit of vacuuming up the shattered plates and gears before they could add to the pile and had even begun sucking away some of what had already gathered.

The space was tight and there wasn't much room for me to contribute. Varrin's blade was a blur in front of him as Etja's beam carved at the edges of his destruction and loosened gears and pistons. Nuralie's arrows impacted around Etja's blast, caustic acid dripping down to soften the metal. While I searched for a good time to add an Oblivion Orb to the mix, I caught sight of a glimmer of flowing liquid beyond the wall of twisted metal before me. It was at the machine's center, and I focused on it instead of doing something that would probably just get in Varrin's way. This machine was alive, and my Soul-Sight was picking up the spiritual presence buried at its center.

Another tick and a demonic face grew from the twisted metal before us, its mouth dripping with molten brass. Its fanged mouth was open in a scream that none of us could hear, and fear gripped my intestines and sent ice water through my veins. The whispering voices rose in crescendo with the visage's appearance, but I squashed the emotions and ignored their urgings. Varrin flinched under the dreadful glare and stumbled, losing his footing. The wire at his feet released him and he was caught by the suction, beginning to tumble backward. I used Gravity Anchor to pull him back toward me, then snaked my fingers into the collar of his breastplate and held him steady.

An arc of lightning found its way into the hole Varrin had wrought, now six feet deep into the machine. It rocked us, more powerful than any bolt before it, but Gravity Anchor kept us locked in place through the paralysis and a Heal kept Varrin's health from falling too low. Varrin's sword was lowered, held in a trembling hand. He didn't move to renew his assault. I looked into his helm, finding his eyes bloodshot and snapping from side to side, flinching from invisible terrors. His teeth were bared in a rictus grin.

I took a breath and turned back to the demonic face, which pulsed in silent laughter. I focused my Sight on it and it disappeared, exposed for the illusion it was. I turned my thoughts inward, arresting the voices with my ability, no longer fixated on the visual aspects of how the power worked. The voices went silent, leaving me hearing nothing but the fierce ringing. I then connected to Varrin and used Reveal, sharing my understanding of the illusions. He blinked and his eyes fixed on me with shock that quickly turned to fury. He grabbed my wrist and I let go of his breastplate, dropped Gravity Anchor, and let him get back to work.

Flames began pouring out from the broken pipes around us, trying to cook us in our armor, but we ignored them. It hurt, but with our defenses and Xim's Heals, it was manageable. I focused on the glow at the center of the machine as my pride and joy ignited, filling my nostrils with the scent of burnt hair. We were close now, and after a few more frenzied strikes, I gave Varrin two swift knocks on his back. He gave me a questioning glance and I opened my fist in the signal for him to unleash everything he had. He turned back to the machine and pulled his blade to his side for a thrust. He twisted his hips as he launched the blade forward, driving the tip of the blade into the machine and unleashing every stack of Blessed that he had accrued from Xim's Pounding buff.

The target ally gains one stack of Blessed each time they deal damage with a melee weapon attack, so long as they are Blessed.

It was a lot of stacks of Blessed.

A crimson vortex swam around Varrin's blade as the attack annihilated everything within three feet of it. He extended the blade with the thrust to more than ten feet, penetrating all the way to the core buried ahead of us. A huge chunk of the soul disappeared as it was obliterated by the unbridled divine power.

The flames around us died, my body grew lighter, the sweltering heat began to abate, and the suction ended. All the hazards dropped away instantly when the attack landed. I watched as the soul writhed, then faded away into nothing.

Varrin stumbled back and fell on his ass. I slid off of Gracorvus, swinging around to check on the party. Xim's mana was at half, but no one's health was too low. Varrin's stamina was below 20%, but the big guy had good recovery, assuming we had time to recover. A green potion materialized in his hand and he pulled off his helm, then swigged it down. He was drenched in sweat, as was I, and I clambered out of the hole to begin distributing water skins. A final round of Heal restored our hearing, and we all had a second to breathe.

"That was supposed to be a level 8 boss?!" Xim shouted. I wondered if her ears had been properly repaired.

"Yeah, I didn't know giant machines were on the table," I said, wiping the sweat from my face with a rag. Varrin had taught me the value of having a few towels of varying sizes on hand. "At least it couldn't move. Hopefully, level 9 isn't a fucking Gundam, though that *would* be kind of cool."

"It was a resource drain," Varrin said, climbing out of the machine. "And a damage test. It was sturdy, but its attacks were weak."

"I think you're underestimating the power of compounding," I said.

"But how's a normal level 7 party supposed to beat that?" Xim mumbled through a mouthful of mana potion. Etja also tossed one back.

"This isn't a Delve for normal parties," said Nuralie. "*We're level 7. We beat it.*"

"We also all held back some trump cards," I said. "We might have been able to burn it down pretty fast if we'd gone all out."

While the others continued to go over the fight, I looked around at the room full of rubble and unmoving gears. The lines of mana began to fade and the room began to grow dark. The obelisk barely poked out from a pile of stone and after a couple of minutes, it lit up with power and distributed our stats. We all took the time to distribute them, myself included. Now that I had 16 available, I'd get 3 bonus points from Dumping, rather than 2. Even if I held onto the points for two more levels and had 32 banked, I wouldn't accrue enough stats for another bump compared to spending 16 points twice.

I also wasn't sure whether I could apply Dumping to the same stat multiple times at once by placing, say, 10 points into a stat rather than 5. The wording of the achievement made me think it wouldn't.

Dumping: After spending 5 or more stat points at once on a single attribute, you are granted 1 additional point in that attribute.

I also didn't want to waste time messing around with the achievement, since I wasn't confident we had much time for testing. I placed 5 points into Intelligence, 6 into Wisdom, and 5 into Strength, getting a bonus point for each. I'd been debating whether Strength was something I wanted to level, but it increased the amount of armor I could wear and also improved my Blunt attacks. It at least made sense to get it to 20 for another evolution. The distribution didn't net me any evos for the moment, but scamming an extra stat point was all the reward I needed. I took a look at my stats and planned out the *next* 16 points.

Strength: 16

Agility: 10

Speed: 10

Fortitude: 40

Intelligence: 27

Wisdom: 33

Charisma: 10

Luck: 10

I planned to stick with the same distribution I'd just done. While I wanted *more* INT for *more* damage, 6 points in Wisdom rather than Intelligence would get me the WIS 40 evo by level 10, bringing me one step closer to becoming a paragon of absurd resource

pools. I'd also get the Strength 20 evo at level 10 and I could snag the INT 40 evolution at level 11. That was going to be one hell of a power spike.

A loot notification distracted me from my salivating.

Your party has slain 1 Clockwork Alpha: Elemental, Grade 17. Your party receives the following rewards:

- 1) 17 Emerald Chips**
- 2) 1 Metal Essence**
- 3) 1 Machine Essence**
- 4) 1 Clockwork Gear Shield**

Party Leader has set chip and currency allocation to: Even Distribution.

You receive: 3 Emerald Chips.

Remainder of 2 Emerald Chips have been awarded to Varrin Ravvenblaq for outstanding contribution.

Party Leader has set item allocation to: Master Looter

Party Leader receives all other rewards.

I pulled out the shield to inspect it. It was a large round shield with sharp spokes along the edge. It was coal-black with glints of brass beneath, as though it had been heavily scorched. A lattice of orange-red lines ran across its surface which smoldered like the embers of a dying fire.

Clockwork Gear Shield

Requirements STR 20, Shields 20

As you persist, your enemies break.

Armor Rating: High

Effects: While in combat, you may activate Clockwork Gear with 1 second of concentration.

When you activate Clockwork Gear, you gain 1 stack of Clockwork. For every 10 seconds Clockwork Gear is active, you gain an additional stack of Clockwork, up to a maximum of 10.

For each stack of Clockwork you have, you gain an amount of Shielding and Thorns (fire) equal to 10x the number of evolutions you have in Shields (current value per stack: 20). All stacks of Clockwork are lost when this ability ends. While this ability is active you are Slowed.

This ability has an 8-hour cooldown.

It was an excellent shield with a powerful ability, but I was well equipped with Gracovus. Xim, however, was using a basic round shield with a durability weave. She was more than happy to accept it. Between her self-healing and the shield's ability, she might have been a better tank than I was. Of course, she would need to drop another 20 points in Fortitude to properly compete.

With everyone finished looking at gear and placing their points, I gave the party a sharp look.

"We could benefit from a rest, so nobody says anything about the obvious question."

"Right," said Xim. Nuralie gave a silent nod.

"The obvious question?" said Etja. "Oh! You mean about, uh, yeah don't want to jinx it."

By the time our distribution was finished it was pitch black and even my dark vision was useless. The ground shifted slightly, and I felt the rocks and rubble sink down until the floor was level again. Unease crept up on me when a series of scraping noises came from above. A rumble came from behind me, and I reached out blindly toward the massive machine, but it was gone.

The *question* was whether the next boss would happen immediately.

The *answer* was yes.

Vibrant, prismatic light swelled around us.