

If I had to play 'Marry, Fuck, Kill' with my active abilities, *Oblivion Orb* is the skill I'd marry. It was reliable, flexible, *affordable*, and it got the job done when things needed to get dead.

Shortcut is the skill I'd *fuck*.

I teleported out of the three-armed clutches of the mimic, appearing atop the burial slab of the room's central corpse. My boot knocked his skull to the side, the gleaming gem along his forehead sliding to his temple. It glittered and swirled in response. I whispered a quick apology to the gentleman while surveying the state of my party members.

Varrin was laying into a series of lancing spikes that had grown from the wall, their hard tips attached to knotted, organic limbs. He parried and evaded with inhuman speed, spinning his greatsword overhead and bringing the momentum down on the softer bits, severing the spikes. When they hit the ground, the spikes squirmed and then melted into the floor. He was keeping pace with the attacks, but I doubted he was doing much damage.

A mouth as wide as a sofa had opened at Etja's feet, its flat teeth clacking together as it bulged out from the ground. The golem escaped by casting her gravity magic, darting halfway up to the ceiling. She was now establishing air superiority by raining death beams down on the various limbs and facial features sprouting from all surfaces of the room.

Xim's scepter was covered in crimson flame, and she shield-bashed a groping hand away, then connected with her weapon, setting it ablaze. Her martial prowess wasn't near the level of Varrin's, however, and she was becoming overwhelmed by the attacking appendages.

A few of the grasping limbs around the room had gone limp, golden arrows piercing their forms, and the face on the wall that had been speaking with us hung lifeless, an arrow protruding from one of its aberrant eyes. I spotted a shadow dart out from one of the corpse-filled alcoves, Nuralie diving out of cover as the entire recess exploded into thrusting spikes.

I processed the situation and took action.

I cast the spell *Life Warden* on Etja to shore up her defenses, and a thin layer of dimensional distortion coated Etja's exposed skin. It was the only new active skill that I'd been willing to commit to over the last year.

Life Warden

Physical/Dimensional

Cost: 10 mana reserved plus 10 mana per hour

Cooldown: None

Requirements: Physical Magic 10, Dimensional Magic 10

Grant a nearby ally the buff “Life Warded”. Any time a Life Warded ally would take physical or dimensional damage, you take half of that damage instead. The damage you receive in this way is reduced by 1 for each level of your Physical Magic skill, but cannot otherwise be reduced or negated by any means other than natural resistance or immunity. Life Warded allies must remain within a number of feet of you equal to 20 plus your Dimensional Magic skill level to sustain this effect, or within the range of an aura skill originating from you and by which the Life Warded ally is affected, whichever is larger.

It was the only skill that I’d gotten through diligent research, rather than circumstance or necessity, and by diligent research I mean that it was listed inside a book on auras that Umi-Doo had gifted me. The normal range of the *Life Warden* skill was too short for the spell to be viable in high-level Delver fights, where battles could sprawl across massive areas. For me, however, the range was as big as my aura, and the range of my aura was, ‘Are they in the party?’

With Etja shielded and cutting through mimic with her anti-magic laser, I turned my attention to the others.

I split off seven slabs of *Gracovus*, arranging them into a shield that I willed through the air to Xim’s back, blocking a claw descending on her flank. I sectioned off a part of my brain to direct the shield and give her cover, then leapt off my perch to Nuralie, assembling the rest of *Gracovus* into my own shield and activating its atrocious roar.

An abominable, spectral face launched from the shield’s surface, letting out a bellowing moan like the distorted wailing of desperate children. The limbs and spikes that Nuralie ducked and wove between turned toward me, abandoning their pursuit of the archer-chemist to batter my defenses with clubs and lances. I blocked what I could and soaked the rest.

With some of the heat taken off of Etja, Xim, and Nuralie, I considered what I could do for Varrin, aside from continuing to allow the mimic clubs to crack me in the ribs, blessing him with a fresh stream of stamina.

Eh, Varrin didn't need any more help.

I instead focused on trying to figure out a better plan of attack than the reactive melee we presently had going on.

The room was too small for a proper *Explosion!* without catching my allies in the blast, and I doubted the spell would do much against the mimic, who was immune to physical damage. I also hadn't advanced enough with Mystical Magic to use *Dispel* on something as general as an entity's mana matrix.

Oblivion Orb was my best bet, but there were so many attacking limbs around the room that I didn't want to fully commit to a melee and get distracted by the few targets in arm's reach. Fortunately, I had a better way to use the spell. I threw open my inventory screen and started pulling out my new favorite toys with my free hand.

Throwing hammers.

It sounds ridiculous, I know. Believe me, Seinnador—and Lito—told me as much when I commissioned them. Why throw a hammer? A knife, mediocre for throwing reliably at a moving target. An axe was OK but not great for the same reasons, it just had a bit more weight behind it than a knife. A spear or javelin was much better since it was easy to get the pointy end to stick where you wanted it to go. But a hammer? No blade, axehead, or speartip to stab into a target. Without the force and weight of an arm swinging the blunted head, it would hurt, but wouldn't do much else. Just, why?

Because it's fucking awesome, that's why.

I'd raised my Blunt skill high enough to specialize it into hammers, which gave my hammer attacks some pretty serious armor penetration. Further, I had *Homing Weapon*, which was a technique that did exactly what it sounded like it did, while also adding extra speed and oomph to my weapon throws and returning the weapon to my hand after it hit. *Additionally*, I had selected an appropriate evolution to my Blunt skill once it reached level ten, which took advantage of my avant-garde build choices.

***Hammer Throw:* You suffer no penalty for using hammers as a thrown weapon. The maximum speed and distance you can throw a hammer is increased by 10% per level of Blunt.**

So, when asked, 'Why throw a hammer?' 'Compounding returns' is my answer, and coincidentally my new favorite phrase. My Strength was a ten, not as good as Varrin or Xim, but still at the lower end of superhuman. *Homing Weapon* buffed the speed and force of thrown weapon attacks, which was additive with Strength, but my *Hammer Throw* evolution was a compounding bonus applied on top of both. Huck a hammer at eighty miles per hour, get another fifty on top from my technique, and then double that from my Blunt skill of ten... that's a hammer moving at a third of the speed of sound.

And I was *going* to get these fuckers making sonic booms before long.

If all of that wasn't enough to kill, I could also use my Strength evolution, *Nimean Weapon*, to channel *Oblivion Orb* into any Strength-based attack I made. Conveniently, throwing a hammer really fucking hard was a Strength attack. The reality-erasing sphere of annihilation that triggered on hit would finish what the hammer started.

The System didn't have an official name for the combo, but I liked to call it *Void Hammer*.

I hopped back to put some space between myself and the weaponized mimic limbs sprouting from the ground that were assaulting me and chucked a 260-mile-per-hour world-eating hammer at one.

It exploded.

The hammer traveled through the first limb, splattering mimic goo across the whole room, then through the next limb and the limb behind that before triggering *Oblivion Orb* on the fourth—the one I'd targeted—taking enough mass out of its center that it buckled and collapsed.

Before the first hammer was back in my hand, I had out a second, which I hurled at the limbs assaulting Xim, aiming to give her more room to breathe. The Cleric was baptized in the viscous fluids that were the result of mimic meets *Void Hammer*, but her only reaction to the gore bath was that her look of fierce concentration was replaced by a malevolent grin.

Xim was a big fan of *Void Hammer*.

Our party was a violent kitchen prepping mimic cutlet dinners for the entire neighborhood. Varrin and Etja slice, I minced, Nuralie skewered, and Xim tenderized, then roasted. The enemy's attacks grew wilder and more frenzied.

The mimic formed jaws along the floor to trip us up, but we were nimble-footed and quick from endless mobility drills with Varrin. It launched spikes and blades from all directions, but our movements were agile and limber from learning Myria's acrobatics. It dealt glancing blows and made sacrifices to earn shallow cuts, but we'd slept on gravel beds and used fucking sandpaper to wipe our asses, toughening our minds and bodies. The fight dragged on, and perhaps the mimic had hoped that we would run out of stamina, but we were built for continuous fighting.

The inflated physical stats also helped.

The fever of battle took me over, my mind entering a flow state as my attacks devastated the foe. My cheeks were stiff from bared teeth and a manic grin. My muscles sang with endorphins, rewarding me for the abuse I was putting them through. This was it, the feeling I longed for, the desire that kept me awake at night, this sensation of power, of indomitability. My blows were inescapable, my victory, inexorable. I couldn't just do this all day, I could do this *forever*.

That thought snapped some part of me awake. I couldn't do this *forever*. I couldn't do this for ten more minutes! There was a limit to what we could endure, and as the floor grew thick with inert mimic goo, laid to rest with divine fire and arrow, mystical beams of force, and spiritual blades, the mimic was unrelenting. Each *Void Hammer* took ten stamina and seven mana to use, and I'd thrown enough of them to banish a hundred liters worth of mimic to the darkness between realms. I was growing concerned.

This fight would have been impossible for a 'normal' platinum party, even one as well-prepared and expertly trained as Varrin believed a platinum group should be. We'd been thrust into Delves with challenges way above our level range in the past, and I was beginning to wonder if our expectation of overwhelming odds was doing us a disservice in this situation.

More and more, this fight wasn't feeling like a fight, it was feeling like a *trap*. Something to overcome with cunning and guile, rather than brute force. The fact that we could stand up to this situation *at all* was luring us deeper into the snare. An impossible challenge should make us look for an alternative, not make us think "oh, we deal with this shit all the time, *we'll fucking win anyway*." This was *supposed* to be an insurmountable obstacle.

We needed to retreat and regroup, give ourselves time to think the situation through. Now, how do we retreat from an endless wave of enemies sieging us from all sides? I stole another glance around the room, looking for the best exit strategy when something caught my eye and made me feel like a complete fool.

The ruby gem atop the central corpse's head was shining brilliantly.

I lobbed my next hammer at the corpse's temple, sending the jewel, and the majority of the decrepit head, to the nether.

Emotions drained out of me, and the aftermath of my battle trance was like a lead weight chained to my leg, dragging me into the depths of fatigue and torpor. My thoughts lost their manic edge, replaced by despondence, but I could see the situation for what it was now. The mimic was already a brutal enemy in a straight fight, but it fought dirty, as well.

I watched my party members shake off the effects of the mind-warping gem as I minced another mimic. Eliminating the gem hadn't done a thing to stop the mimic's onslaught. Once I was satisfied that everyone had their head on straight, I made the call.

"Quick advance!" I shouted, and everyone snapped into new action.

Varrin used *Spiraling Strike*, his blade growing in length and his body becoming a spinning blur, eviscerating everything within twelve feet of him. He dashed toward the exit of the room, opposite where we entered, clearing a path as he went.

Etja swooped down to Xim, who leapt up onto the golem's back and wrapped her legs around her waist like she was riding a bronco. Etja shot to follow Varrin, with Xim shield bashing and scepter smashing limbs that got too close to the caster. One thrusting spike scored a hit along Etja's side, and I grit my teeth against the damage transfer.

I sent the second half of Gracovus to Nuralie, who grabbed it tightly with all four limbs, even wrapping her tail around it. I willed the shield back to me at full speed, and Nuralie released her hold when she was a few feet away from me. She landed in a roll and sprang back to her feet as all nineteen slabs of the shield assembled into a platform hovering off the ground. I jumped on and Nuralie backflipped out of the path of a massive foot descending from above, landing on the shield with her back to mine. It was a tight fit, but she was already firing more arrows. We launched after the others.

The hallway beyond the crypt was not an improvement.

Groping hands reached down from the ceiling, trying to snag us as we flew, but I brought out *Arbitros* and held it in two hands, using the warhammer to shunt the attacks aside. I didn't have good footing for making solid hits, and they wouldn't have done much against the mimic anyway, but it kept the hands at bay. Nuralie's position in this formation was normally to watch the rear and make sure we weren't pursued. Maybe fire some arrows to waylay any tagalongs. With the mimic, that tactical choice didn't make much sense. The mimic didn't pursue us, it was everywhere.

As we snaked past claws, spikes, and massive mouths trying to scoop us up with their tongues, the growths receded once we were out of range, only to reform anew ahead of us. Fortunately, the process took a few seconds, and much of the path ahead was cleared by Varrin, who rampaged down the hallway.

The warrior didn't have a flight ability, but you'd barely know that with the way he rushed down the corridor. His feet were on the walls as much as the ground, his fluid and everchanging battle stance taking him from enemy to enemy and cutting them down with machine-like precision.

He'd use the momentum of a swing to carry his body, touching down for a split second with the ball of his foot before taking the force and applying it to the next raking hand. He'd find a wall, kick off from it to cleave a spike from the ceiling, release his blade with one hand to reach up and push away, adjusting his course to the next wall and taking out two more.

At one point he was entirely upside down, his greatsword spinning in the air before him, until he grabbed the hilt of the weapon and used the energy of its rotation to right himself enough to plant a foot on the ground before he fell from the air. He ended that move by cleaving a face growing beside him down the middle. I don't even think he needed to cut that one. It had just been watching Varrin with wide eyes, looking as impressed by him as I was.

As Varrin did his clearcutting, more faces began to emerge on the surfaces of the hall. They were identical to the strange 'woman' that had spoken to us earlier, its lazy eyes staring us down from all directions. The smiling, drooling mouths began to scream at us as we hurtled past, and between the screams, it spoke.

"Finally! Finally!" it shrieked in Loson'binora. "No more suckling swine clawing at the Delve's tits! No more feasts for fools! Come! Come!"

The faces contorted and melted away as fast as they appeared, each one speaking only a few words before the next took up the cry.

"Such fine children! So soon, as well! How many generations have come and gone?! How many eons since we saw such haste towards the end?! It has been so long!" Between the shouts were chattering squeals and throaty gags that might have passed for a dying man's fit of laughter.

"What in the absolute fuck?" I muttered to myself as the faces continued to spout nonsense.

Before long, our group came into a new chamber, one which pulsed and moved like a living creature. The walls, ceiling, and floor were covered by a thousand identical faces. They spoke and laughed and spat and howled. Some looked like they wept, but all of them had eyes fixed on one point—a hole in the center of the room, leading down.

No more limbs grew to attack us, no more gnashing teeth or hungry mouths. Still, I couldn't help but think of this hole as some sort of throat.

"Go on! Go on!" shouted a face. "It's the only way to leave!"

We studied the pit, only Varrin brave enough to let his feet touch the face-covered floor. The mimics he stepped on smiled up at him, and the faces seemed to delight in the abuse. It was... weird.

"Why does it always have to be a hole?" Varrin asked, waving at the dark opening. "One where we can't see the bottom?"

"It's always down," I said. "That gives us either a hole or stairs. Holes are quicker."

"Ladders," said Nuralie. Pause. "Holes, stairs, or ladders."

"Sounds like a drinking game," I said.

"What about a lift?" asked Etja.

"Like an elevator?"

"Yes! You could use an underground river or something to turn a water wheel, and use that to create an elevating or descending platform."

"We'll add it to the list," I said. "Holes, stairs, ladders, and lifts."

"Now it sounds like a card game," said Xim.

"Why?!" screamed a face. "Why are you talking?! Go down! Go down!"

I held up a finger to shush the face. Surprisingly, it piped down.

"What do we think?" I asked.

"I'm not staying *here*," said Xim, looking around at the faces in annoyance. "If I want to be in a room of countless faces screaming nonsense at me, I can just go home."

"The objective is to reach the obelisk," said Varrin, "and then 'conquer the challenge that awaits us.'" He sighed. "Seems as good a place as any to look for the obelisk room."

“A hungry giant invites you down its gullet,” I said. “It’s warm inside, and no enemy will ever reach you.”

“Are you quoting something?” asked Xim.

“Nope,” I said. “Just explaining the situation to myself.” I rolled my right shoulder, working out some stiffness. “Alright, let’s go.”

And so we jumped merrily into the belly of the beast.