

“Hmm, wonder what Fervor monsters look like,” I said.

“Spiders,” said Nuralie. I jumped at her sudden appearance beside me.

“Really? Spiders?” I scratched my beard. Definitely needed a trim at this point. “Feels kind of normal, ya’ know?”

“They’re very scary,” said Nuralie.

“Sure, but I’ve never been bothered by spiders. I mean, I try and catch them when I find them in the house and let them go outside when I can.”

“Do your spiders have human heads?” she asked.

“They, uh, do not.”

“Are they six feet wide?”

“Negative. Are you describing spiders as they’re generally found in Arzia?”

“No,” said Nuralie. “These are much worse.” Pause. “They’re muttering as well.”

“Muttering?”

“It sounds like a religious chant, but I couldn’t recognize the language.”

“Awesome. How many?” I asked.

“Lots,” she said.

“Cool.”

I filled Nuralie in on sharing our specific health, stamina, and mana values through the interface, and both she and Etja were on board with reciprocating. I glanced at all the numbers, getting a sense of who needed the most protection.

Xim and Varrin both had health just above 100. Compared to my pool of 367 it looked low at first glance, but it was massive for any normal level one. Fortitude was probably each of their highest stat. Nuralie and Etja were hovering in the low 30s, which made them the priority for keeping out of harm’s way. Etja had the most mana, aside from myself, so she looked like the main caster. That was assuming she knew how to cast.

I turned and motioned for the group to form up.

“So, seems like a swarm,” I said. “Suggestions on tactics?”

“It depends,” said Varrin. “If the creatures follow normal Delve patterns, then the tank pulls them into a tight group and we focus on area-of-effect abilities.”

“*If* they follow normal patterns,” said Xim.

“Exactly,” said Varrin. “Swarms are comprised of weak individuals but are a considerable threat to vulnerable party members when they attack in numbers. Since these are god-spawn, it’s anyone’s guess.”

“The System titled them Praying Heads,” said Nuralie. “Minor aberration, grade zero.”

I thought back to the System telling me I was able to ID monsters on sight after finishing the Creation Delve. It was an ability that I hadn’t been able to use so far and had nearly forgotten about.

“Does that tell us anything?” I asked.

“The System’s grades are simple enough,” said Varrin, “Minor indicates it’s the lowest form of aberration, and grade zero means that one of the creatures should prove a challenge to a single level zero Delver. That is, a Delver going through the Creation Delve.”

“That’s the same grade that the stickmen had, right? Those first monsters we ran into inside *The Toxic Grotto*.”

Varrin nodded.

“Those were minor demons, but yes. The grade was the same.”

“That’s not so bad, then. We kicked the asses of fifteen of those. We’re all a good bit stronger now than we were then.”

Varrin exchanged looks with Nuralie.

“There’s more than fifteen,” she said. “At least a hundred.”

“Ok,” I said. “That’s six or seven times as many. Do we feel six or seven times as strong?”

Varrin gave me a grim look. Xim shook her head.

“Come on,” I said. “We’ve all got more stats, better gear, new active and intrinsic skills, new passives.”

“Maybe three times stronger?” Xim said, uncertain.

“Fine. Still, we can’t walk away from this.”

“No one’s saying we should,” said Varrin.

I looked to Nuralie.

“You still on board as well?” Nuralie paused, then nodded. “What about you, Etja?”

Etja hesitated, looking between the members of our group.

“I want to help,” she said. “Orexis didn’t-” she clasped two of her hands together, worrying at her fingers. “Orexis didn’t care about me. I don’t think... I don’t think he cares about anything, really. Not even Anesis. He wants her, but he doesn’t care about her.” She took a breath, which made me wonder if she needed to breathe at all. “While he was inhabiting me it was terrible compared to the way I am now. It was like drowning in a dark ocean that was slowly dissolving me. If he gets what he wants here, I know he’ll come for me again. He doesn’t let things go.”

“Even if we stop the specter of Orexis in here,” said Varrin, “the real Orexis is still outside.”

“That is true,” said Etja. “He cut off a piece of his soul to inhabit me. If it’s destroyed, maybe even he would feel it? I guess I’m hoping it will make him hide and recover. Even breaking that piece off took a lot out of him. It might be a stupid thought.” She let her arms drop to her side. “Besides, I don’t know how to get out of here. If we don’t figure all this out the place will explode, right?”

{Technically it will *implode*.} Cage thought to us. {Since the dimensional barrier would fail once the weaves get overloaded.}

I rolled my eyes.

“We’re all agreed then,” I said. “We’re in a Delve that’s out of our league and if we don’t figure it out we’ll probably die. Nothing new there. As far as these Praying Heads, we can focus on the traditional method Varrin mentioned. If it’s ineffective, we’ll pivot.”

“Pivot to what?” Varrin asked.

I laid out a basic plan, relying heavily on input from the others. After a few minutes, we agreed we were ready to tackle the room. As ready as we would be, at least.

As we made our way down the hall, I got a new notification.

**You are entering an area with a significant concentration of Divine mana. Divine mana is opposed to your Dimensional attunement. Bonus mana regen is negated.**

My mana was already topped off, but I hoped it wouldn't become an issue for the entire Delve. It seemed that divine hellspawn were one of my weaknesses.

We crept up to the room's entrance, with myself in the front position. When we entered, Xim and Varrin spread out just behind me on either side, with Etja and Nuralie closer together and behind our three-point vanguard.

Despite having heard Nuralie's report, the room was still a chilling sight.

It was a large, spherical chamber around a thousand feet in diameter. The surfaces were covered in the same intricate network of glowing blue runes, which flickered and pulsed in waves as the Delve continued to tremble. At the center of the room was a figure half as tall, its body wrapped head to toe in massive strips of cloth inked with an even denser array of sigils. It hung suspended by a hundred thick cables stretching out from the chamber's edges, wrapping around the mummified body.

As I watched, a strip of the cloth came loose, and the form beneath shivered. The runes along the sphere reacted, glowing brightly. A few sparked and sputtered out before the room dimmed back to its normal, soft pulse.

We began to make our way deeper into the room until I recognized the creatures Nuralie identified.

What she'd described as 'spiders' were clustered along the very bottom of the wrapped entity and also in a mound just beneath it. Each one had a multitude of chitinous limbs covered in serrated edges. All of the creatures' legs were woven together, creating a tangled mass as they hugged close to one another. It made it impossible to tell how many there were, beyond the vague sense that it was a lot.

Their bodies were dark brown and red, like a mix of dried and fresh blood, with fleshy sinew stretching between their appendages and viscous liquid dripping from... everywhere.

At the center of each body was a human-like head—and the word ‘human’ is used loosely here—from which the limbs sprouted. It was *not* like a spider with a human head, it was a human head with eight or more nightmarish legs growing out of the neck.

Their jaws held multiple rows of sharpened fangs, and there were many fleshy flaps along their neck and beneath their eyes from which more teeth sprouted. It made me wonder if the head would open up like a sliced ham into a half-dozen different mouths.

But the creepiest fucking thing was the chanting.

It was the muttering of dozens of voices, low and feverish. If I hadn’t been looking right at the monstrous things I would have thought I was one room over from a Gregorian chant convention exclusive to bass-baritones. One where each member decided to perform to a different ungodly rhythm and that had somehow been double-booked with the weekly seance of Necronomicons Anonymous. It was almost musical for each individual, but en masse, it was chaotic babel.

Finally, after we got a step too close, one of the heads rotated in my direction and turned its clouded, crimson eyes upon me.

It was time for my debut.

I cast *Shortcut*, closing half the distance remaining between us. The Praying Head reared back, and let out a foreboding moan. The other heads lolled in my direction, each one mimicking the cry of the first in a cacophony of feverish wailing.

I held my hand to the sky and shouted my own prayer.

“By the will of saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur, I invoke disaster! In the names of Ascanio Sobrero and Immanuel Nobel, I implore the universe to hear me! Deliver mine enemies into the sky in itty bitty chunks! Now! Behold! *Explosion!*”

I snapped my fingers and the lower mound of heads detonated.

The muttering and moans turned to desperate wails and gurgling cries as the mass of tightly packed creatures was scattered into a fifty-foot radius. A dozen or more got chunked, reduced to mangled limbs and blown apart skulls, but many more were injured, losing a leg or part of their face. The outermost layer was stunned, writhing for a handful of seconds before righting themselves.

The group above disentangled itself, and dozens more of the Praying Heads began dropping to the floor, skittering over the corpses of their brethren, their howls doubling in intensity. Before long, a horde of monsters was rushing me, and I activated *Gracorvus*.

Until now, I'd never used the shield in real combat. I'd put it into targe formation several times, but not while staring down a group of hostiles. So when the ghostly visage of an atrocious creature erupted from its front and let out a bellow in return to the advancing monsters' howls, I was taken by surprise.

The roar sent a ripple through the oncoming heads, causing them to pause their advance for a brief moment. Then, they began not to moan, but to scream, charging me even faster.

"Well, I've got aggro," I muttered to myself, preparing to receive the charge and pulling out the mace Lito had lent me. *Arbitros* was four feet of glacier-blue frozen steel, and I was just strong enough to one-hand it.

When the first of the heads got within reach, I swung it down on the aberration, pulping its skull with little resistance. For the briefest moment, I thought that this might not be as tough as the others had made it sound. Then the next dozen swarmed me.

I bashed a pair away with *Gracorvus* while bringing *Arbitros* around with the momentum, cracking the next Praying Head open and slamming into the two beside it. Four of the heads began clawing at my right arm with their serrated legs, while another pair unhinged their jaws and bit down on my right leg with gaping, fang-filled mouths.

They weren't able to penetrate my armor, but the mass of six beasts, each of which weighed as much as a full-grown pitbull, threw me off balance. I stumbled, trying to swing my hammer back toward the right. I took out another head with the spike on the back of the weapon, but this opened up my left flank to attack from five more heads.

Their claws scraped at *Gracorvus*, hooking over the top and sending the slabs snapping open and shut as they pulled backward, trying to strip it from me. I bashed a few more away, but another three latched onto my left leg. I swung my hammer, despite more heads clambering on the back of the ones already latched to my right arm. All the while, more of the horde began amassing at the edges of the fray, climbing over one another to get to me. They threatened to bury me under their sheer numbers.

Varrin charged in, swinging his greatsword. The blade cleaved through three of the heads, cleanly separating them from their limbs or cleaving them entirely in half. He rotated the sword over his head, then brought it into a low arc toward the ground,

splitting three more that had drawn close. He waded into the fracas and carved a swath until he was beset on all sides, then he activated one of his skills.

In a flash, his body spun in a full 360-degree loop, the end of his blade lengthening with a burst of red mana. A split second later every head within eight feet of him collapsed into pieces.

After the attack, Varrin held the weapon extended out behind him with one hand, then spun his body to meet the weapon's orientation, gripping it with his second hand and bringing it back around on the next pair of aberrations charging him. He never stopped moving, and heads fell before his onslaught nearly as fast as they came.

Nearly.

Despite Varrin's non-stop onslaught, a few of the monsters made it to his legs, beginning to entangle him with their raking limbs and biting maws. He faltered, the cadence of his strikes interrupted, and more of the beasts closed in.

A beam of crimson light fell from the sky, six feet wide, and two of the heads were caught in the blast. They ignited, bodies engulfed in red flame, screeching and crawling away over their allies. The fire spread, and soon six of the creatures were immolated. Xim charged in after her divine spell, caving skulls with her scepter, and slamming more away with her shield. The horde divided themselves between us, and then Nuralie and Etja began to rain death upon them.

Two glass spheres of green liquid exploded within the heads' ranks, bursting into toxic vapor that began dissolving flesh. The heads retched up foul ichor, staggering and collapsing in the cloud of poison, but the rest scattered away from the attack. Arrows lanced out at the ones trying to escape, burying themselves in eye sockets and bulbous necks.

Etja followed behind, her steps moving to an unheard rhythm, and she brought her hands up toward a group of heads. Three of them rose off the ground, their claws raking at the air, and their bodies began to dissolve into fragments. The bits flowed into a line and shot toward Etja's outstretched hand. The golem *absorbed* them in a gruesome mimicry of Orexis' breath, then shot forth a beam of azure force that splattered another head. Her movements flowed in a dance as she slung spells like orchestral hits.

Dozens of the creatures were dead at our feet, and my footing became slick on the gore. I was barely able to move beneath the horde atop me, and I cast *Shortcut* to fall back to the edge of the fight, moving forward again into the fray with arms free to smash more of the aberrations with my mace. I sent *Gracovus* into its pointed formation,

following up my hammer strikes with punches at the praying heads too close for the long weapon to hit. This tactic gave me leave to cull another six of the monsters before I was tangled up in them again.

Varrin launched his whirling technique once more, scattering the heads grappling him and cutting down several more in his weapon's radius, but gained only a few seconds of breathing room. Xim was backpedaling away from the group, striking with her scepter at the ones growing close, but there were fresh gashes on her face, one eye held shut against flowing blood from her scalp. Etja and Nuralie continued to lob ranged attacks, but there were just too many creatures for us to manage.

Soon, Nuralie was darting from side to side, evading several heads that had broken away from the main group. She fired her bow as she retreated, but outside of the horde, the heads were quick and nimble, dodging the arrows as they came.

Etja was surrounded by a dozen or more of the creatures, which were floating off the ground and slowly dissolving into bits. The golem's face contorted as she struggled to keep the spell going as even more barreled toward her. One managed to get close enough to strike her leg.

No blood fell from the wound, but her health bar lost a sizeable portion.

I cast *Shortcut* to appear by her side, smashing away the attacking head and beginning to take apart the ones that were floating. I intercepted several more approaching, giving Etja room to breathe as she wove more spells. Her mana was more than half gone, but at least three-quarters of the enemy remained.

Despite my efforts, heads flowed around my arcing hammer to approach Etja from the flank. Scrabbling claws raked at my legs as I maneuvered to try and shield the mage from the attack, but they approached from all sides. Etja launched them into the air, sending them hurtling away, but the disintegration effect was no longer present in the spell.

The horde had begun to encircle all of us, Varrin and Xim overwhelmed by monsters grappling their limbs. Nuralie continued to evade, but the heads grew thick around her, giving her little room to move. I was unable to guard Etja from all sides. These things weren't much of a threat to me, unable to penetrate my armor, but I wasn't able to keep all of them focused on me.

My mind scrambled for a solution. *Explosion!* Was my only AOE, and its cooldown was an hour. I'd seen a litany of other spells, and I had active slots open. I did my best to think over what was available as a head bit down on Etja's wounded leg, taking her

below half HP. She teetered, nearly toppling over before I smashed the head away from her.

Grotto swooped in, his eyes alight with amber light as he levied a mental attack on the creatures outside of my range. Several shrieked and fell, writhing in mental agony under Grotto's assault, but it was a temporary tactic.

[*The minds of these creatures are alien and fragmented,*] Grotto thought to me. [*I am unable to cause significant harm to them.*]

"You have anything bigger, Etja?" I shouted over the wailing moans. "Something to hit more of them?"

"Maybe!" Etja yelled. "It will take a minute to set up!"

I wouldn't be able to guard her for a minute. I needed another body. A second me to take on the beasts coming from Etja's back.

That's when my mind fixated on a spell I'd already been considering.

I slotted *Dimensional Summon* in a free active skill slot, steeled my resolve, and cast the spell. It was mana-hungry, and I didn't know what kind of creature I'd get out of it, but we needed another fighter on the field.

A dimensional tear formed in space beside me, at least nine feet tall and six feet wide. I flicked my eyes toward it as I continued to beat away more Praying Heads, keeping Etja tucked close to my back.

A thick tentacle snaked out from the portal, covered in downy, black and green feathers that swayed in the air as though it were water.

"Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me."