

The light in Drel's hand expanded outward and enveloped us. Within it, I was cast back into the world of complete black the same as when we'd first transitioned to the Third. My allies were once again still visible, though the light illuminating their forms was dim. A shadowy form coalesced near me, and I took a step back as it began to come into focus.

Tall, lean, with a wide-brimmed hat. It held what looked like a pipe, and ethereal vapor puffed from its mouth. It was a woman, I realized. A Littan, and a familiar one. The level thirty gold solidified and became as real as the first time I'd seen her in the basement of Typhoon's warehouse. She turned and looked in my direction, although her eyes passed over me like I wasn't there. Her soul was barely visible, the darkness itself seeming to compress it.

Nola drew first blood, her long, thin sword whipping out at a level twelve copper, and half of his head was on the ground before the enemy even realized they were under attack. There must have been twenty enemy Delvers gathered, ranging from low-level coppers to three golds around level thirty, including the Littan.

Drel, Xorna, and Ealdric rushed the golds, while Lito's party and the others from my own moved to handle the lesser threats. Nola simply moved to the next target of convenience, giving little consideration to their relative strength. The enemy hadn't been prepared, many wearing casual clothing, or with weapons stowed beneath tables and benches. It quickly became a slaughter.

The ebon world still had not brightened when the fighting broke out, and before I could call out my warning, my mind was crushed like a can of air at the bottom of the sea. I collapsed to my knees, becoming consumed by an oppressive force. The black around me tore at my soul, sucking away my life, leaving me cold and icy, gnawing at my thoughts and taking those away as well. My mind became blank and the only thought left was one of escape.

This cave was a ravenous pit, the mouth of a leviathan greedy to gorge itself on everything I had. Where the Eye's nature was to see all, this entity existed only to *take* all, to pull the marrow from my bones and hollow out the core of my identity. My id and ego were drained away, leaving me to exist only as a jumbled mass of fear and panic, the scraps of which soon began to follow the rest of me. The sucking absence went beyond anything I'd ever known, even further than death. I was being obliterated and *replaced* by the being that erased me. I tried desperately to struggle against it, but I was a fly in the winds of a hurricane. My only hope was to shut my eyes against the terror and hope that it did not take all of me.

But my eyes weren't shut, I realized. Scraps of my senses still reached me, like the spits and crackles of a dying fire. I could see the faint glimmer of the souls around me, though the world was sideways. My allies, even the enemies, were just as buried and consumed by the black as I was, but they still fought. They moved unhindered, not noticing the voracious being tearing at them. They weren't aware of it. I was seeing something they couldn't.

I was blinded by it.

I clamped down on my soul-sight, driving the ability into the ground with what little will I had left. The light around my allies disappeared, and the black around me receded. Thought and sensation returned, and I felt cool dirt and stone beneath my fingers. I was lying on the ground, curled up on myself.

Drel'gethed waved an arm and dark hands erupted from the ground at one man's feet, wrapping his body and pulling him down into the earth. Ealdric dashed across the room, too fast to see, skewering another man who held a spear. The enemy had managed to partially don his armor, but Ealdric's claymore went straight through his chest, the metal failing to even slow the strike.

Xorna took her ax to a woman's knees, who sprayed gouts of fire at Xim's mother even as she fell. The Xor'Drel was unaffected, and a kick to the woman's temple left her unmoving. Nola moved as quick as her husband, taking apart two silvers in their twenties with her thin blade before they had a chance to use a single skill. Chunks of them were scattered across the room.

A man and woman were pinned to the wall, massive arrows puncturing their hearts, and Ember drew another arrow to launch at a man trying to flee. Ashe tried to pin down the Littan with her sword, but the woman's body became mist which flowed around her. Lightning arced from Cole's hand, forcing the Littan back into her normal form, and Lito followed up on Cole's attack with a hammer strike to the back of her skull. The blow sent her face crashing into the floor, and yet the Littan still began crawling away. Nola halted her by pulling out a shortsword and thrusting the blade through the woman's back and kidney, into the ground below. The Littan screamed, but was trapped.

I watched the massacre, unable to move. My body refused to respond, feeling like a dream where the ground swallowed my legs as I tried to run.

[Grotto, can you do something to help me out? Jumpstart me with adrenaline, maybe?]

**Your familiar is incapacitated.**

That wasn't good.

Xim and Varrin tag-teamed a level twelve silver who chucked axes covered in blue flame while leaping off the cave walls. They corralled him into a corner, and Nuralie hit him with an arrow that exploded into green vapor. The man staggered, then collapsed, as Nuralie fell back into a shadowy corner, disappearing.

Xim caught sight of me, made a quick scan of the room, then rushed over. Varrin followed behind, watching her back and facing what few enemies remained with greatsword leveled, though they were getting mopped up by the group's powerhouses. Two-thirds of the enemy was dead, with several restrained or incapacitated. Only three still fought, and did so only by the grace of their combatants, who looked to want to subdue them rather than add to the body count.

Xim knelt and looked me over.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Your health is full, and you don't have any status effects."

"We have to leave," I mumbled.

"Leave?" she said. "Alright. But, why?" She turned and shouted to Drel, who'd disengaged from the fight, leaving it to the Ravvenblaq Thundralkes to quell the remaining resistance. He began to float over.

"Something in here is too strong," I managed to get out. "Just seeing its soul did this." I began to get feeling back in my limbs, though I could barely shift my weight.

"You see the souls of others?" said Drel.

"Yeah. Saw one real big. We go now."

Drel paused to consider.

"I will tell the Ravvenblaqs," he said.

"How powerful?" asked Xim as Drel left. "Stronger than Umi-Doo?"

"Umi-Doo didn't cause my ego death when I saw him."

"Ok," said Xim, turning back to Varrin. "Help me get him up."

The pair helped me to my feet, and I staggered between them toward the Thundralkes. The height difference between them left me a bit lopsided, and my footing was as unsteady from the body parts littering the ground as the semi-paralyzed state of my legs. Still, I was beginning to warm back up. Every step got blood pumping, and I was gradually able to support my weight.

“Leave?” said Nola. “We’re triumphant!” Her armor was spattered in gore.

“We need to interrogate the prisoners,” said Ealdric. “Before they die, that is.”

“Esquire Arlo possesses a unique skill,” said Drel. “I believe it best to heed him. We may return if the caution was unwarranted.”

“He was on the ground the whole fight,” said Nola. “Probably a fear effect. He may not be of his senses.”

“Mother,” said Varrin as we got close. “I trust Arlo’s judgment. He resisted an atocidile’s roar and charged a man ten times his level. I don’t think it’s a fear effect.”

Nola looked Varrin over, going through some internal struggle.

Ealdric sighed.

“Arlo certainly proved himself in the Creation Delve, son, but he’s still only level one. Drel, what could he possibly have seen that the rest of us haven’t?”

Drel opened his mouth to speak but stopped as heavy footsteps sounded from deeper in the cave.

“No, no, no, no, no,” came a ragged voice. It echoed around us unnaturally, even with the hard cave walls for the sound to bounce off of. “My children, I wanted you to *live*.”

A figure stepped from the darkened corridor that led down into the depths of the cave system. It was hunched over, its form clothed in tattered gray strips of cloth that hung off of it like dirty bandages. Even with its bent form, the creature’s back brushed against the ceiling of the tunnel, which stood at least seven feet in height. When it entered the main chamber, it straightened some, towering over all of us, though it still wasn’t fully upright.

A long snout poked from beneath ragged cloth, and where eyes might have been, there was nothing but a pair of holes that evoked a sense of endless depths, absolutely dark, and hungry.

Its maw opened slowly, revealing a cavernous mouth that had no teeth or throat, but only dark swirling threads of energy leading to its center. They spiraled hypnotically, beckoning us to throw ourselves in. L'appel du vide made manifest.

Its arms were long and ended in simian hands with knuckles that dragged the ground, even with elbows bent. From beneath the cloth that covered its chest, two smaller arms wrapped its gut, clutching at the garments. Each finger of the smaller hands glowed with a different hue of sickly light.

Its flesh was gray and drooped into folds at the joints, though it was pulled taut against engorged muscle along its limbs.

We watched it silently as it stopped in front of one of the fallen Delvers.

“My child, my child, my child, what has become of our future?”

It scooped up the man's body in one hand, as effortlessly as one scooped foam from a bath. Entrails spilled from the Delver's sliced belly, and the creature delicately caught them with one of the smaller limbs. It guided the ropy entrails back up and tucked them gently into the man's gut.

“I wanted us to see tomorrow, and the day after that. I wanted you to be here, oh Davian, Davian. Davian the spearman. Davian the bright. I wanted your children to know me well.”

It caressed the side of the corpse's face with its thumb. My heart sank as the creature reminded me that these were men and women with families and entire lives beyond the machinations that led them here. They may have been involved in the plot that threatened the survival and well-being of several of us, but they were still human.

“I want this to be right, Davian. I want to carry you with me, and I will. It is a simple thing to grant myself this wish, Davian. Become a part of me, Davian.”

The creature's chest heaved, and gusts of wind blew in through the mouth of the cave as the creature inhaled. The body of the slain Delver, Davian, dissolved into mist and flowed into the creature's maw. First skin, then muscle and blood, organ, then bone. Nothing was left behind but a pile of clothes and equipment, which the creature let clatter to the ground. It walked to the next corpse, a woman.

“Lithy. I wanted to find a way to like you more. I wished for you to find what made you happy so that the bitter scent of your mind no longer lingered wherever you traveled. I sought this, but now you've perished before I found it. I wanted you to live, Lithy.”

I was stunned by what I was seeing. I believed the others were as well, but my focus was fully on the creature before me. Even without my soul-sight, there was an easy strength to it; like the gentle sway of a crocodile as the apex reptile prowls through the water. I feared to speak or move, to dare it to see me.

“I know of this being,” Drel whispered in his spectral voice. “I advise for us to leave. I wish not for him to notice us.”

I turned as slowly and as silently as I could, my body having regained feeling just in time to grow stiff with fear.

The Ravvenblaq watched the creature intently, their bodies poised for action. Their eyes did not move from the monster, but Ealdric nodded slightly, and we began to back out of the cave in unison. Unfortunately for us, the mouth of the cave was gone.

“I would like it if my visitors would stay,” said the creature. “I wish to speak with you, to understand those that butchered my children.”

“Orexis,” said Drel, addressing the creature. “I believe that is your name. Forgive me if I err.”

It turned its hollow gaze on Drel’gethed.

“I know this name and others have known me by it. The name I desire cannot be heard here. The realm is too thin.”

“Orexis, we have come to investigate. These men and women have committed grave crimes.”

Orexis *breathed*, and another fallen Delver disappeared into its maw.

“I have no interest in crimes,” said Orexis. “I do not wish to understand your pretense of judgment.”

“What do you wish to understand?” said Ealdric. His sword was still drawn, held in a tight grip with both hands. “These people are rogue Delvers, wanted by the crown.”

“I do not care what the crown *wants!*” Orexis yelled, the sound loud enough to send pebbles raining from the ceiling. My ears rang, and the others winced. Nuralie collapsed with a cry, holding her hands over her ears.

Orexis moved to another body and inhaled it.

“I see, I see, I see, I see,” said Orexis, his smaller pair of hands scratching at his belly as he spoke. “Mortal man comes to punish mortal man for punishing. Punishment beget by my own desire, desire which impregnates the minds of the punished, and they have brought themselves to bear upon me. To punish *me*.” The hands clawed and scraped more violently.

We all took a second to process his words, as Orexis paused his feast to pull Nola’s shortsword from the Littan’s back. She squealed and rolled onto her side, clutching at the wound. Then Orexis selected a new corpse to fondle

“*You* sent these people to assault us?” said Nola, her voice strained. “*You* tried to kidnap my son?”

Orexis looked up from the fresh body he was caressing, surveying our entire group for the first time. He dropped the corpse and lumbered toward us, knuckles digging deep grooves into the stone cave floor as he went. Weapons were raised, but he stopped a few feet away, head moving from side to side. His snout snuffled at the air. Even that was powerful enough to create a strong breeze.

“The wise have brought me gifts,” Orexis said. “Or the foolish bring treasures to a dragon’s den. It does not matter. I accept them either way.”

Orexis reached out a massive hand and snatched up Varrin faster than the big man could bring his greatsword to bear. Nola tensed to pounce, but Drel took her by the arm.

“This is not a fight you win,” said Drel.

“I don’t care,” said Nola. “That’s my boy.”

She launched at Orexis, sword-point forward, the speed and strength of her dash creating a shockwave in the air. Her long, thin blade erupted into scarlet light and a dozen more blades sprang out from it.

I never saw Orexis move, but his right hand intercepted Nola, her wall of blades crashing into his palm. He flicked his hand downward and Nola was cast into the ground, sending chunks of stone flying out from her impact.

There was a moment of silence as dust cleared from the air, revealing Nola kneeling in a newborn crater, helm shattered, face bloody. She looked up at Orexis in rage.

“Fuck,” said Ealdric.

Then, he went to back up his wife, with Lito and crew right behind him.