

Ealdric opened with a spinning slash. His blade grew twice in length, sailing for the side of Orexis' head, but the creature's left hand appeared in front of the blade. The hand pivoted, sending Ealdric sailing behind him with his own momentum.

Ember launched an arrow at Orexis' chest, but one of his smaller hands intercepted and crushed it.

Lito hurled his molten chain at the creature's right wrist, just below the hand that held Varrin. Orexis moved the arm up a hair, and the chain missed entirely. The smaller right hand snaked out from beneath its rags, revealing itself to be nearly as long as the larger appendages, and it grabbed the chain. It yanked hard, and Lito flew away across the room to smash into a stone wall hard enough to crack it.

Cole summoned an array of six elemental darts, fire, ice, lightning, acid, earth, water, and began rapid-firing them at Orexis. The creature turned its body, then ignored the attacks as they crashed harmlessly against his hide.

Ashe called forth a creature with six wings, its center dominated by a large eye. The summon began gathering energy to cast a spell, but Orexis reached out and crushed it in his grip before the thing could act. It threw the corpse at Ashe, bowling them away in a tangled mess.

Nola leapt from her crater, sword swinging in an upward strike, but one of the smaller hands grabbed it and twisted. Nola spun through the air and lost grip on her sword, then crashed into the ceiling. On her way back down Orexis used his left hand to swat her away and into the wall next to Lito, this time sending chunks of stone falling from the impact.

Xim, Nuralie, and I watched the fight in awe. Everything happened in the span of two seconds, before I could even think about how to help. The moment I considered using *Shortcut* to land an *Oblivion Orb* somewhere on Orexis' head, Drel's hand was on my shoulder.

"Your group should not intervene," he said hurriedly. "We must fight with everything. You would be collateral."

His body swirled into a dark and speckled ribbon, then flew toward Orexis' face. Xorna was right behind him, ax in one hand and tower shield in the other, leaping up and bringing the ax down toward the monster's skull.

One of Orexis' smaller hands pointed a glowing finger at Drel and an arc of dark energy shot from it. When it hit, Drel scattered into smoke which drifted and tried to reform.

Orexis' large left hand backhanded the cloud, dispersing it across the room with a massive gust formed from the sheer speed with which it struck. The hand then came back around to grab Xorna from the air before she was close enough to strike. It then began bashing her into the floor, showering us with rubble.

Cole gathered the flying debris into a pointed spear the length of a sedan and shot it at Orexis. The creature once again turned to let his flank take the hit, coming out unscathed.

Ember's arrows were caught and shattered, even when she used skills to fire volleys of three at a time. One arrow arced behind Orexis, turning midair to assault from his rear, but the creature's back seemed impenetrable as it smashed against it.

Ealdric returned, hovering in the air as his blade spun in a circle before him, creating a halo of white light. He thrust his arms and the circle shot at Orexis' back, Ealdric's sword flying in its center. One of Orexis' smaller hands made a gesture, an oozing blue fingertip pulsed, and the energy of Ealdric's attack fizzled out of existence, sending the sword falling to the ground, skittering along the stone.

Then, a tail revealed itself from beneath Orexis' rags.

"No more mewling," Orexis said, as the tail whipped out and took Ealdric in the side. He hit the edge of the cave with a thunderous smack, the most forceful blow so far, and half the wall collapsed on top of Varrin's father as he fell.

Drel had reformed, weaving a spell of dark-purple energy, and it shot out in a dozen tendrils for Orexis' face. Yet another of the monster's glowing fingers twitched, throwing circular pulses of mustard-yellow mana, which sucked the attack into its swirling power, then crashed into Drel, shredding his form once again.

Xorna struggled back to her feet and swung for Orexis' leg, but the monster bucked and stomped at her, revealing a hardened mass from beneath the rags, rather than a foot. Xorna had her shield up and ready as she swung, but the heavy metal shield warped and cracked from the impact, and the monstrous hoof crushed her into the stone beneath it.

Even had I wanted, there was no opening to assist. The fighters' movements were a blur, Orexis's hands nearly appearing to teleport from place to place to block and counterattack. Still, I ran through my abilities, discarding each in turn.

*Explosion!* would hit allies, and what would it do if Cole couldn't even hurt the thing?

What would I *Dispel*? By the time I saw one of Orexis' fingers twitch, whatever magic it was casting had already activated.

If I closed the distance for *Oblivion Orb* I would get hammered like the melee fighters with multiple times my own Speed, the same holding true for fighting with my mace or shield.

*Shortcut* might be my only viable option, but would I teleport in the way of one of my allies?

Xim's hands gripped the haft of her mace, and I could see her watching the battle with taunted features. Her parents were being thrashed, and there was nothing she could do. Nuralie had her bow drawn, but her arrows flew slower than *either* of the Ravvenblaqs, and they had been caught and decimated at every turn. Varrin struggled in the monster's grip, reminding me of a similar scene with the atrocildile.

That guy got grabbed a lot.

But Varrin didn't look panicked. I watched him struggle to dislodge himself, but there was none of the fevered alarm in his eyes I'd seen in the last grabby fight. His body shone once or twice as he attempted some skill to break free, but each failed in turn.

Ashe dismissed her summon, banishing its corpse and leaping to her feet. She summoned a new ally, using a Divine summoning spell, rather than the Dimensional one I'd seen before. A being of pure light emerged and immediately began firing blinding white beams at Orexis. This caused the monster's rags to smolder and dissolve.

Orexis shrugged off a renewed assault from both Lito and Nola, wrapping the former in its tail and pointing a vomit-colored finger at the latter. Lito's neck was wrung, and Nola's skin turned black and necrotic. As Nola fell and Lito writhed, Orexis turned its attention to Ashe, her summon continuing to scorch away his rags.

"A Kallergian is a good choice to fight me," said Orexis, "if you hadn't summoned an infant."

Light the color of rotted eggplant blasted from one of Orexis' fingers, and Ashe's summon sprouted mounds of mold and fungus, then burst into a spray of tainted compost. Orexis brought a hand down toward Ashe, and the warrior somehow managed to dodge. It wasn't through skill or speed, Ashe seemed to stumble in *just* the right way for Orexis to miss.

Orexis tilted his head to one side when his strike failed to hit. Then his features twisted and the hollow holes that were his eyes shuddered. His head snapped forward like a lunging pitbull. Ashe wasn't able to evade this one, and she was caught in Orexis' maw.

The beast *breathed*, and Ashe dissolved into mist, flowing into the monster.

"No!" Ember screamed, pulling out an arrow thicker than any I'd seen. She roared and pulled back on the bow until veins bulged on her muscles. A swirling vortex of energy formed at the arrow's tip, the screeching sound it made swallowing the cries from her throat. She released, and the arrow became a railgun shot. It traversed the distance instantly, striking Orexis center mass and creating a cacophonous explosion that shook the entire cave.

The few enemy Delvers that still lived fled deeper into the caves, helping to set one another free and carrying those too wounded to stand on their own.

Ealdric hadn't emerged from the rubble he'd been buried under.

Nola writhed on the floor, dark veins crawling across her skin, rotted flesh beginning to slough off.

Xorna was half-buried in the ground, armor warped and twisted.

Drel was a cloud of vapor, becoming ever more dispersed by the raging wind created by the fight.

Cole moved to support Ember, who swayed and staggered, panting.

Ashe was gone.

And Lito's body was thrown out from the cloud of smoke and dust that had swallowed Orexis. He rag-dolled and hit the ground, completely limp.

Orexis stepped forward from the haze, and rose to his full height.

His rags were destroyed, and what little remained fell to the ground as he straightened. He rose higher and higher, growing beyond what he should have gained from standing fully upright, until his head scraped the top of the twenty-foot-tall chamber. He stretched out his large pair of arms, their span nearly forty feet across. Beneath them, the thinner appendages rose and splayed their many-colored fingers toward us. Beneath even those, yet another pair of arms was revealed, each holding a spear in hand at the height of his calf, but at the level of our chests. His tail snaked up his back, then appeared

around in front of him wielding a shield the size of a tractor-trailer door. Its surface was onyx, but it glinted with myriad colors.

Varrin's eyes went wide as he watched his mother suffer, while he was still trapped in the creature's grip.

"Submit," Orexis said, and the crushing weight of the beast's black soul once again fell upon me.

This time, I wasn't the only one who felt it.

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When the fugue state forced upon me by Orexis' soul was lifted, I was in an unfamiliar chamber deeper inside the cave system, and I was greeted by a System message.

**You have entered Delve 0102: Calvani Caverns**

**Difficulty: Copper**

**This Delve is non-operational.**

At least we were in the right place. I was propped up against a stone wall and was relieved to find I was free of bindings, not hogtied the way I'd half expected to be. I supposed that Orexis didn't see much reason in tying up someone who may as well be a gnat to him. Either that, or he felt it was rude to handcuff guests after knocking them unconscious with the mind-annihilating power of his mere presence. I chose to believe that latter, as it was more reassuring to think the creature had standards, rather than that he saw me as an insect.

It was a wide, round room that reminded me of the obelisk chamber back in *The Toxic Grotto*. I realized that this room was, in fact, an obelisk chamber, made evident by the

pillar at its center. Unlike the obelisks I'd seen so far, however, this one was small, maybe seven feet in height. It was white, rather than black, with blue and gold runes carved into its surface. Orexis hunched over next to it, manipulating something on a low table with his smaller, glowing hands. Beside him floated a small orb with glowing symbols along its surface. It looked eerily familiar.

Was that a Delve Core?

I heard Xim groan and turned to find her and Nuralie to my left, both beginning to stir. Ember and Cole huddled together to my right. They each had red eyes and wet cheeks. Ember's fury had burned away, her face now a mirror of her twin brother's post-grief shellshock.

Lito, Xorna, and Ealdric were laid out in a neat row in front of us, though there was no sign of Drel'gethed. Varrin knelt next to his parents. His eyes widened as he noticed us wake.

"Xim," he whispered, crouch-walking over to us. "Xim, can you heal our parents? My mother needs cleansing as well. I don't know how long..." he trailed off as he looked back at the woman's ravaged skin.

"Right," Xim said, bleary-eyed. She took a glance around the room as she stood, then walked over to the prone figures. "We're not partied," she muttered, before casting a single heal into each. She kept an eye on Orexis while she worked.

"What do you think?" Varrin asked.

"Your mother's the worst. Lito's neck is broken, but he's alive. His regen looks like it's matching the internal bleeding. My mom is fine, I guess." Xim bit her lip. "I mean, she has more fractures than bones, but she's healing on her own."

Xim got to her knees in front of Nola and began casting *Cleanse*. Varrin watched anxiously, his hands balling into fists, then relaxing.

"Luckily this stuff counts as poison. It makes the spell cheaper," Xim said, exhausted. "Still, it'll take most of my mana to get the status effect's damage below her normal regen. We'll have to wait for them to wake up on their own."

"That's fine," said Varrin. "I mean, that's good. They'll survive."

"Not Ashe," Ember said, voice choked. She gave a phlegmy cough, then glared toward Orexis. Whatever the creature was doing, it was ignoring us. Cole hugged his arm

tighter around his sister and whispered something to her. Ember pressed her palms to her eyes, bringing her knees closer to her chest.

“Do we have any idea,” I said, “whose fucking cave we walked into?”

“You seemed to know better than us,” said Nuralie. She pulled a potion from her inventory and passed it to Xim. I was amazed we still had access, but I also didn’t know any way to block it. Regardless, I wouldn’t assume anything was beyond the capabilities of a creature that just took apart eight D and B-tier Delvers without breaking a sweat.

“Thanks,” said Xim, casting another *Cleanse*, then downing the bottle.

“I have healing as well,” said Nuralie. “When they’re able to swallow.”

“Low-level healing potions are a drop in the bucket for these three,” said Xim, nodding at Xorna and the Ravvenblaqs. “Might do *something* for Lito, but I doubt he’s swallowing anything anytime soon.”

I took a closer look at the Guardian’s neck, which was a swollen mess of blue, purple, and red. It was amazing he was alive at all.

“And it was Orexis’ cave we walked into,” said Xim, answering my earlier question.

“Sure,” I said. “I caught the name, but do we know more than that?”

Xim took a deep breath as she cast a final *Cleanse*, then sat back on her heels. She studied Orexis for a moment as the monster worked, then turned back and met my eyes.

“Orexis is,” she paused. “Well, if *that* is the Orexis I know of, then he’s a god.”

“What?!” said Varrin, looking up sharply from his mother.

“Half a god, really,” Xim corrected herself.

“*Half* of a god?” I said. “Like he’s half god, half man?”

“No,” said Xim. “Orexis is an ancient god of yearning. He’s one half of a pair of twin lovers; Orexis and Anesis. Anesis is a goddess of, what’s the best way to put it? Release, I guess. Their concept when together is difficult to translate, but is something along the lines of... satisfaction?”

“Your description only increases my discomfort,” I said. “Twin lovers? As in, they’re just so alike that they’re practically twins or-”

“That’s irrelevant,” said Varrin. “I don’t care if they’re fucking siblings.”

“Literally, even.”

“Is there anything we can do about it?” said Varrin.

“They’re *gods*, Varrin,” said Xim, looking far too calm for the situation.

“No gods walk Arzia,” said Nuralie. “Only avatars can exist.”

“So says most doctrine,” said Xim.

“There are no records of true gods upon the world,” said Nuralie.

“There are no records of avatars, either,” Xim countered.

“There are records.” Pause. “Unreliable ones.”

“It doesn’t change anything. This is out of our depth.”

“I mean, we went from a *god*,” I said, “to *half* a god. Now maybe down to the *avatar* of half a god? What’s an avatar, by the way?”

“A vessel of power for a god to inhabit,” said Nuralie. “Its form is mortal, its power a fraction of the true deity’s.” Pause. “Still greater than any person can attain.”

“Was that rule decided before,” I said, “or after Hiward discovered the Delves?”

Nuralie furrowed her brow, considering the question.

“Before, of course,” she said. “Some Delves are very strong, but I do not think *this* strong.”

“Well,” said Varrin, “I don’t know about *that*.”

Before Varrin could continue, Orexis turned and began to approach us.