

The hike from one spawn-infested subchamber to the next was about four miles, which made the entire loop around the outside of the main cage an eight-mile circumference.

We moved at a jog, giving our health and mana some time to recover while trying not to dawdle too much and letting the world implode around us. The goal was to make the journey in about thirty minutes, which would put Etja close to full on health and at about half on mana. My mana regen shot back up to 125 when we left the prior chamber, which was really 95 when considering Shog's thirty-mana tribute each hour. I'd hopefully be somewhere around seventy mana when we arrived.

As we made the run, we heard the occasional skittering ahead of us and caught sight of at least one Praying Head fleeing before our advance. The others of its kind had seemed intent on fighting to the last head, so I found it curious that one or several had decided to run. When I asked the question out loud, Etja was the one who answered.

"The heads are overwhelmed with fervor for their god, but they still have individual personalities. For some, the compulsion isn't strong enough to overcome their will to survive."

"Is this some of that Orexis knowledge?" I asked. "Would have been good to know more about those things going in."

"No," she said. "When I used my consume ability in the fight I harvested a portion of their memories. It was unexpected and... awful."

"I bet. I can't imagine what kind of memories a mutated murder-head would have. It didn't seem like those things had much personality beyond muttering and extreme violence."

"They were once followers of that entity. They sacrificed themselves to it in exchange for eternal life in servitude but didn't expect to be continually resurrected in the form of a monstrous drone. When the compulsion to protect their deity took over, any individuality they might have expressed was lost to the rage."

"Except for the few that 'expressed' themselves by getting the fuck out."

"Right."

"Can you do this with *anything*? Absorb memories?"

"I don't know. It was the first time I cast the spell. Also," she looked at me excitedly, holding out two arms, "now I can do this!"

As I watched, the surface of her limbs morphed into a replication of the chitin from the heads, but without any of the gore and goop. The hard substance glinted in the pulsing blue light of the Delve.

“That’s pretty cool,” I said. “Guess you’ve got your armor for the moment.” She nodded, smiling like a kid on her birthday.

“Something else I’ve been meaning to ask,” I said, addressing the group. “If we find the specter of Orexis and it comes down to dealing with the thing ourselves, how do we hurt it? It’s just a soul as far as I can tell.”

“Most schools of magic can cause some sort of effect on the soul,” said Xim. “My divine fire can damage non-corporeal entities who oppose Sam’lia, or that she abhors.”

“Guess Orexis counts,” I said. “Quest of vengeance and all.”

“Varrin’s family practices spiritual swordsmanship, so I’m sure he’s got something.”

“Soul-strike is the first ability we learn after Creation,” said Varrin. “It’s a mixed attack that hits flesh and also damages the soul directly. It won’t be as effective against a non-physical entity, but it will still cause harm.”

“What about you, Nuralie?” I asked. She was moving along on all fours, her steps completely soundless, with her tail swishing in the air behind her. She glanced up at me.

“I have spiritual sedatives, but they are meant to be used as an antidote for different mental effects, like enraged. I didn’t brew them for offense. Maybe they can help still.”

“Etja?”

The golem shook her head.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I should get too close to Orexis.”

“Think he might try and body-snatch you again?”

“On my character sheet, there’s a passive called *Bound Construct*. It’s inactive, but it gives me bonuses when I’m inhabited by the soul of my master. Right now it says ‘soul not found’.”

“Maybe you could trap him if he dove back in?”

“I have no idea how I would. He’s much more powerful than me. Maybe you should-” She bit her lip, then continued. “Maybe you should make me dangerous to inhabit.”

“What? Like booby-trap you?”

“I could keep Nuralie’s spiritual sedatives inside of me, and consume them when Orexis attempts to take me over. It may cause him to bond with a weakened vessel.”

“That sounds really dangerous for you, though.”

“I’m only a couple of hours old,” she said with a sad smile. “I don’t even know how long I *can* live like this, without Orexis maintaining me. Maybe something happened during my Creation and I can live for a long time, even without him, or maybe I’ll break down in a week. Either way, I’d rather have that happen than become Orexis’ sock again. And if he does retake my body, I’d rather not be around anymore. So, I don’t mind if it’s dangerous.”

“You know, in my world, there’s a famous story where a slave is given a sock, and because of the gift he’s set free.”

Her brow knit in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“Sock is a weird word to use,” I said. “I might have said puppet or glove. Still, it made me think, maybe you’re your own sock now.”

“My own sock?”

“Sure. Instead of Orexis walking on you, your own foot’s in there now.”

“Your metaphors are awful,” said Varrin.

“What I’m trying to say is maybe don’t be so eager to unalive yourself.”

“Right,” she said, still looking lost. “I don’t have any socks though.”

“We’ll get you a pair tomorrow,” I said. “I like mine with some color. I have, *had* a pair with little dachshunds on them. I had a whole silly sock drawer, in fact.”

“What’s a dachshund?”

“A small and long dog.”

“What’s a dog?”

“A furry, four-legged mammal that is always excited to see you and has very bad breath.”

“I see.”

“I prefer amphibians,” said Nuralie. “They’re much more calm.”

I couldn’t decide whether she knew what dogs were, or was commenting on mammals generally.

“Shog, can you hurt a soul?”

***“I ingest the mana matrix of those that I consume, tearing it from their soul and making their power my own. It causes grievous harm to their spiritual essence.”***

“Delightful. But this guy doesn’t have a body to eat, he’s just a soul. For now, at least.”

Shog contemplated the matter as he flew silently beside me.

***“I am certain that I can find a way to eat him.”***

“Ok, keep up that can-do attitude. What about you, Grotto?”

*[My psychic attacks are a manifestation of spiritual magic. I am uncertain how effective they will be against an organism that lacks a physical mind, but the realm of thought transcends such mundane limitations.]*

“Alright, so you’re gonna think at him real hard?”

*[If that fails, I will focus on managing your biological systems to offset the effects of any acute suffering you endure.]*

“I appreciate it. That just leaves me.” I jogged along for a second, running through my options. “Yeah, guys, how do I fight a soul?”

“I have some ideas,” said Xim. “Your *Oblivion Orb* may be able to transport a piece of soul to another dimension along with whatever else is inside the spell.”

“Taking chunks of his soul away, sounds good.”

“Although, it wouldn’t be very effective,” she said, dashing my little soul-obliterating dreams. “Since the soul doesn’t have organs or a brain, the damage would be very limited.”

“Taking chunks of his soul away, sounding less good.”

“It might irritate him,” Xim offered.

“Yay? Maybe it’ll keep him focused on me. What about *Explosion!*? Can I explode a soul?”

“Nope,” said Xim. “It would be immune to physical damage.”

“Can I *Dispel* a soul?”

“If it uses magic, then there would be something to *Dispel*. But not the soul itself.”

“I can help with that too,” said Etja. “If I’m involved, that is. I have *Nullify*.”

“Oh, that’s like the fancy version of *Dispel*,” said Xim.

“Fancy version?” I said. “Did I get stuck with a discount spell? The System forced it on me, no choices given.”

“*Dispel* is single-target at first,” said Xim, “but *Nullify* is an AOE to start. They’re good for different things. *Nullify* is rarer since everyone with Mystical Magic gets *Dispel*.”

“I get it,” I said. “My version is like a scalpel, hers is like a... big sword that hits everything inside a thirty-foot radius?”

“Your similes are *also* awful,” said Varrin.

“More or less,” said Xim.

“So I *might* be able to counter spells the specter casts, and I *might* be able to irritate it with dimensional hole punches.”

“Can’t be good at everything,” said Xim. “This is a pretty specialized situation, too.”

“Just get in its face,” said Varrin. “Let it beat you up while the rest of us deal damage.”

“*You* can see it,” said Nuralie. “None of *us* can.”

That left the group speechless for a moment.

“Fuck.”

It was around the time of this revelation that we first noticed the flying eyes.

I caught sight of the first one and called the group to a halt. Further down the hall was a creature perched on the side of the corridor, despite the smooth surface.

It had a pair of leathery wings that looked to be about three feet across when it stretched them out to flap a few feet closer to us. Its central body was less than a foot in length, with several rubbery legs that snaked along the tunnel's surface, sticking to it. On its front were two long stalks, at the end of which were beady little eyes. It had a similar stalk growing from its backside as well. It stared at us, unblinking.

### **Eye of Consumption: Trivial Aberration, Grade None**

"If the grade is how dangerous a creature is," I said, "then what does not having a grade mean?"

"It means it's harmless to Delves," said Varrin.

"What if there were a lot of them?"

"It wouldn't matter. Something of that grade wouldn't be a challenge to a mundane peasant with a pitchfork."

"I hear what you're saying, but if there were 178 grade zero monsters, what if there are several thousand grade none monsters?"

"Would a thousand raindrops kill you?" Varrin asked.

"No," I said. "But a flood might."

Nuralie stepped up between us, arrow nocked.

"It's called an eye," she said.

"This is what it says, yes."

"It's staring at us." She drew back on the arrow. "That may be all it does."

She loosed the arrow and struck the odd creature's center mass. Its wings flapped a few times as it collapsed to the ground, then went still.

"Remind me never to film you without permission," I said, moving forward to check out the corpse. I nudged it with my boot, but nothing happened. After a minute of inspection, we didn't even get a System message.

"No loot for grade nones, I guess. Cage, got any insight on this little fella?"

{Well, we've got eyes everywhere. On this side of the Delve, that is. Monster eyes. I have eyes too, in a more abstract kind of way, but these don't belong to me.}

"Your intel leaves something to be desired, Cage."

{What is there to say? They're little monsters with eyes. I don't know what they're for! Although they're flocking around a group of much nastier-looking things closer to the subchamber.}

"Scouts, maybe?" said Xim as she squatted down by the dead Eye.

"If it's an eye of consumption," said Varrin, "there may be other body parts."

"Like the *jaws* of consumption?" I said. "Feels like they'd be infringing on Sam'lia's trademark."

Xim tilted her head in confusion.

"Because Sam'lia has the different organs," I continued. "You know, the Eye, the... other parts."

"Brain, Ear, Tongue, Nose, Heart, and Stomach," she said. "I know what you were getting at, I just don't know what a trademark is."

I started to reply but Xim held up a hand to stop me.

"I don't actually want to know."

"Right."

"We should keep moving," said Varrin. "Nothing more to do than remain vigilant, as we have been."

There was a flutter of wings, and three more of the creatures flew from around the bend further down the corridor.

"Should we take them out as we go?" I asked.

Nuralie pulled her arrow from the body of the first Eye with a squelch, nocked it, and shot another one further down the hall. The two beside it each turned a single eyestalk toward their fallen comrade but otherwise made no move.

"As long as I don't run out of arrows."

"I've got a few hundred extra if you need 'em."

Pause.

“A few *hundred*?”

“Yeah.”

She took out a quiver and slung it over one shoulder, then quickly slew the next two eyes.

“Let’s run and gun, then,” I said.

We set back out at a jog, immediately encountering more of the Eyes, and Nuralie skewered them with arrows without missing a step. She left the projectiles behind, rather than scooping them back up. When her quiver went empty she discarded it to the floor and I handed her a new one from my inventory.

She killed dozens of the things as we went.

None of the Eyes showed any regard for their safety. They landed, watched us approach, and died soon after. They were lemmings and Nuralie was the seaside cliff.

Although I read that lemmings don’t really die that way, the whole thing is an exaggeration. Still, it’s a metaphor that even Varrin would be satisfied with.

Twenty minutes of zoom and doom later, we caught sight of a Praying Head being accosted by a dozen of the winged creatures and paused to appreciate the sight.

The Head struck out with its serrated legs, dismantling one of the eyes while eight others darted around it. For whatever reason, they were far more agitated by the presence of the Head than our traveling slaughterfest. The Head took the time to cut down three more before it caught sight of us.

Its face contorted, and it immediately forgot about the harrying Eyes, turning and fleeing down the corridor. More Eyes appeared, fluttering around it and perching themselves on its legs. We followed, watching as more and more Eyes swarmed the Head until an unseen disturbance scattered the flock. The Eyes retreated further down the hall, leaving the Head unharried.

It turned back to check on us again, then continued bolting in the direction of the fleeing Eyes. Another hundred feet down the hall, we found the Head halted in its tracks.

The Head was completely still, staring down the flickering corridor at a dark shape a dozen paces in front of it. We slowed our approach and crept up, focusing on the new figure.



It was inhuman, looking more like a mass of shaped muscle than something with distinguishable features. It was tall, with a conical top that ended in a blunted point, and two large bulges along the length of its body. Down the center of the creature was a large seam, making it appear as though it was folded in on itself, with another conical mass protruding from its chest.

All along the seam were countless humanoid hands, palms held together as though they were praying.

### **Hand of Consumption: Lesser Aberration, Grade Four**

“There’s the next body part,” I whispered as we all prepped for a fight. “Heads, Eyes, and Hands. Eventually, we’ll have a whole fucked up person in here.”

The Praying Head continued to stare at the Hand, then turned around to face us. It hesitated, looking between our group and the Hand. The Hand monster split down the middle, opening up into a hellish starfish, and the Head made its choice.

It began sprinting toward *us*.

The Hand turned to the side, then began cartwheeling down the hall behind the Head. Its five large appendages rumbled across the ground, the multitudinous sub-hands writhing in the air.

I readied my hammer, preparing to slap an *Oblivion Orb* onto it as the monster got closer. But the enormous starfish of doom cartwheeled twice as fast as the prey Praying Head. Before the slimy, spider-like beast made it halfway to us, the pentameral mammoth slammed down on top of it with an appendage. The hands along its thick, pointed limb grasped the Praying Head’s serrated legs, restraining the monster. When the handsy echinoderm raised its leg, the Praying Head was held firm by tens of clutching sub-hands.

Then, it tumbled away from us down the hall, the still-alive and wailing Head in its grip.

“What the fuck have I just witnessed?” I said.

“It’s a *Hand of Consumption*,” said Xim. “I’m guessing it wants to *consume* the Praying Head.”

“It begs the question,” said Varrin, adjusting his grip on his c’thonic greatsword, “where’s the *Mouth*?”