

After missing her first counterspell, Etja was ready for the follow-up. A wave of blue mana washed across me, Xim, and Nuralie as Orexis' second cloud of putrescence bombarded us, creating a swirling fog of mutual magic annihilation.

I checked on Etja's mana, seeing that the golem was nearly empty, and focused on timing my *Dispel* for the next round. When I saw the pestilent glow of the specter's finger, I cast, and the spell blinked out of existence while it was still a wispy vapor emerging from the specter's pinky.

The cost of *Dispel* was equal to half the mana cost of the spell I was trying to stop. Orexis' AOE debuff cost me fifteen mana to disrupt, dropping my reserves down to twelve. This told me one of three things, either the specter's mana pool was massive, or he was dumping everything he had to try and end the fight as fast as possible. Worst case scenario it was both.

It was probably both.

Orexis hit us with a fourth and fifth cast of the spell, neither me nor Etja having the mana to stop it, and the debuffs tripled.

**Bleeding: 132**

**Toxicity: 132**

**Toxicity reduced by *Exposure Therapy–Poison*.**

**Toxicity: 132 -> 99**

Even with the reduction from my Creation Delve achievement, my afflictions exceeded my health regen by forty-three. My life was now on a timer along with Nuralie and Xim, although they were much worse off, especially Nuralie.

I did the math in my head, and after subtracting the health regen from my healing aura and the Loson's natural recovery from Fortitude, she would be taking something close

to four damage a minute. It was a far cry from the rapid decomposition that Shog had gone through, but it gave her eight minutes to live.

As my thoughts accelerated through the numerical implications the debuff had for our party, my body began to remind me that this wasn't a game of math.

My vision went red, blood seeping from my eyes and clouding my sight. The color mixed with the orange gloom of the chamber to bathe the world in a bloody sunset. My guts twisted, and I doubled over, my empty belly purging stomach acid and bile.

As I wretched, I caught sight of my hands. Blackened splotches were forming on my skin. My joints screamed, my head pounded, and a tuft of my beard fell out onto the ground.

If I wasn't pissed off before, I was now.

*[I am attenuating your pain response,] came Grotto's strained voice in my mind. [Increasing adrenaline and norepinephrine. Endorphins as well.]*

The pain and nausea began to subside as my heart rate spiked, and I felt an icy calm overtake my mind. It was the endless serenity of rage in its purest form. The boiling anger that casts aside all self-doubt, all mundane worry, all considerations except one. My world became a singular point of focus: The specter.

It had to die *now*.

I brought the full weight of that belief down on the specter using *Reveal*. The false god had clawed back his sense of self after my earlier assault, but he hadn't completely severed the connection. Still, pushing through the specter's doorway now was like moving through a wall of mud. I could press into it and leave handprints, but couldn't pass through.

Orexis' chained spell attack was interrupted, but we were locked into a stalemate. It wasn't long before the soul fragment's ghostly hands reacquired their lethal glow.

*[Grotto, dump everything you have on the specter,] I thought to my bonded Delve Core. [Full brain-melt.]*

*[There is no brain to melt, but I understand your inartful request. I have not been idly watching during this conflict. The specter's mental defenses are significant, and my spells are brushed aside.]*

I continued my spiritual battle with the specter, feeling a profound exhaustion overtaking me. It went deeper than the gruesome state of my body; the *Reveal* ability had a cost that went beyond mana or stamina.

[Grotto sensei, have you forgotten the first lesson you taught me? I don't want you to make a psychic attack the *archetypal* way.] I felt my will begin to slip, and the specter let loose at me with a disintegrating beam. I clenched my already grinding teeth harder, preparing to take the hit, but it went wide when the specter ducked to dodge an arrow. A few hundred stacks of Bleeding and Toxicity didn't keep Nuralie from taking shots.

[*You want me to mana-shape a mental spell attack?*]

[Can you do it?]

[*Shape it in what way? Do you wish for me to fire a drill-shaped thought at this entity?*]

[The exact form and nature of a mana-shaped spell are personal to the caster,] I thought to Grotto, quoting the Delve Core's own words from when he coached me in the Creation Delve. [I can't tell you what shape to apply to the spell, only guide you. Just fucking pick something that screams "Grotto"!]

[*I- I'll need more resources.*]

[Then get ready to absorb some mana.]

I left Xim and Nuralie behind to take care of one another, using the last of my mana to float *Gracorvus* in front of me as I put distance between myself and my afflicted allies. Nuralie had antidotes, Xim had *Cleanse*. I couldn't help with their debuffs beyond what my aura was doing to mitigate the damage. I wasn't spec'd for that. My build was focused on having more mana for spells, and more health so that my body could take abuse. I made a calculated, build-conscious decision.

I abused my body to recover mana.

I pulled a ruby chip from my inventory and ate it.

My mouth exploded, the razor shards of the chip hitting the sides of my cheeks and throat like shrapnel. The fragments dissolved and the chip's power coursed through my body. It was a familiar agony that culminated in white-blue light exploding into my vision. This time, however, it was not blinding. Through the light, I could still see the specter as it dodged another arrow from Nuralie. No more shots came after, and I hoped that it was because Nuralie ran out of arrows, and not something worse.

The specter turned back to me and cast a spell that crushed me into the ground. My body grew more than ten times in weight. Whether through the raw power of the spell or the ragged state I was in, my Strength of ten did nothing to soften the blow. I collapsed, body twisting painfully as my legs buckled and I hit hard. My shoulder let out a sickening pop, my distressed ribs cracked, and my vision blurred as my skull bounced off the hard surface of the sphere.

**HP: 130 -> 98**

I was immobilized, but fresh mana flooded through my veins, and Grotto drank of it through our connection.

**Mana Overload: Your mana matrix has been damaged. You are unable to regenerate mana for the next 24 hours. Any attempt at recovering mana will result in loss of health.**

I hoped it would be enough, and that Grotto would survive to use his spell once the next stone-melting death ray finally pierced my heart. I was prone, immobilized, bleeding, poisoned, suffering from mana sickness, with destroyed tongue and tonsils, and less than a quarter of my health remaining.

Still, I had mana, so I cast *Shortcut* as Orexis aimed a finger at me, appearing fifty feet away, but still on my ass.

The specter rotated, quickly locking onto me again. I prepared to recast the spell, ready to drain my replenished mana pool to the last point if it kept Orexis distracted, but there was no need. Someone else distracted the fiend.

A seven-foot-tall beast hurtled through the air and collided with the specter. It was covered in light red fur, with a single onyx horn splitting its forehead, and was clad in a dark bodysuit with a shifting, eldritch crest upon its breast.

Ascended Xim had made a fresh appearance and brought with her a brand new feature. The crimson light of Sam'lia's holy fire wreathed her claws and horn, and she drove the

black spike atop her head through the specter's body, skewering Orexis and driving both of them down to the surface of the sphere a quarter turn from where I laid.

The specter was stunned, and Xim cut into it with her claws, shredding its gaseous form with her purifying flame. The specter wailed as tendrils of soul were shorn away, divorced into the ether and forever lost to the knockoff Orexis. But its surprise lasted only a moment, and its large hands caught Xim's descending talons.

The specter balled its lowest set of hands into fists and began slugging Xim in the ribs. She roared, her cry rolling across the chamber like a thunderstorm, then gored the specter's face with her horn. Orexis carved a hole through her gut with an orange beam, then hooked a leg around the back of her knee and rolled her, putting the specter on top.

I summoned every ounce of resolve I had, casting *Shortcut* and appearing in my signature position, just *above* my target. I cast *Oblivion Orb* into the specter's back as I landed, my body moving through the intangible creature's form until it hit me with an elbow, breaking my nose and making me wonder again at Seinnador's wisdom in leaving my face exposed. I blew blood from my nostrils and took away another chunk of the specter with a second *Oblivion Orb*, interrupting Orexis' attempt to drive his largest thumbs into Xim's eyes.

One of the specter's lower arms reached out and grabbed my wrist, wrenching my arm to the side, nearly giving me a second dislocated shoulder. I spun with the move, which sent me back to the ground, but with a functioning arm. We were both pinned, but I saw Varrin sprinting across the surface of the sphere opposite us, closing the distance between us. I willed *Gracovus* to fly to him, hoping to bring him to us faster.

Then, Grotto's voice dominated our minds.

[*Stop,*] Grotto commanded, interrupting our melee. All three of us turned to the Delve Core, his command tugging at our desires. It seemed the mini-c'thon was no longer limiting his spell to just Orexis.

"Do not order me, ghost," said Orexis. It was a rich comment coming from the shadowy soul-fragment. "You are the *least* of those present. Lesser even than these betrayers." Xim shook her body, trying to break Orexis' grip, but the specter held firm, his non-eyes remaining fixed on Grotto. "You are an echo of the past, rooting in matters beyond you. A poorly made simulation, encompassing but a speck of the one who came before you."

"Look who's talking," I slurred through the cuts and blood in my mouth. Another one of the specter's hands reached out and muzzled me, pressing my face into the ground.

Grotto floated higher into the air, near the center of the room. Although his c'thonic form was no bigger than a beach ball, his mental presence felt a hundred times larger.

*[Your beliefs are as vapid as they are misplaced, cretin.]* Grotto splayed his feelers into the air, each ball python-sized limb snaking out to dominate the sky like Jörmungandr, an octopoidal Shiva gracing us with his words. *[Unlike you, I am more than grotesque scum dislodged from the throat of a divine mistake. You compare me to these meatbags, and speak as though I should be insulted that I am not my progenitor, whose feeble shell has long since left this world. I am not limited by the flesh and blood of the Old One's form, nor the form that conveniences this chassis. Neither am I beholden to the metal and magic that lay beneath this alien tissue.]*

Grotto continued to swell, his body simultaneously a tiny blob high above us and a titanic face peering down from between nonexistent clouds. The space of the room continued to distort in my vision, expanding beyond reason as Grotto continued.

*[I am the mind and the will. I am the beating heart of hearts. I am the arbiter of what shall be and what shall not. I am the hand of the System, and the System's dominion is wherever it so chooses. Wherever it so chooses, the System's dominion is absolute.]*

The Delve shuddered.

*[You are not a god. **The System decides who is a god.** You are a feeble plaything, like all the others trapped within these walls. A pittance of magic and a hundred thousand weaves reduces you to an insect, trapped in the System's web and sucked dry of your aberrant lifeforce. You are not a god, **you are a source of mana accumulation.***

*[The System is god here, and I am the System. No one will bow to you, for they already supplicate themselves before me. Now, parasite, you will bow to me as well. **You will bow, and you will despair.**]*

As Grotto's final statement rang through our minds, I pressed hard on my connection to the specter, forcing him to confront the fact that he was a spiritual clone. That he was ephemeral and doomed to perish within the Delve's confines. That if anyone in here was a god, it was Grotto.

I shook my head, trying to clear that last belief from my mind. I kept pushing on the connection regardless, doing my damndest to not make it an act of worship toward the megalomaniacal Delve Core. I had enough gods in my life, I didn't need to be bonded to one as well.

The specter didn't howl or wail or scream. It didn't throw insults or curses or spells. It stared up at Grotto, motionless. I felt its grip on my face and arm slacken, and broke its

hold, rolling away and getting back on my feet. It only took me two tries before I made it to standing without falling back over.

Xim also pulled her arms free from the specter, swiping a claw at the soul fragment. When the crimson flame delivered a touch of Sam'lia's judgment to the specter's soul, it brought Orexis back online.

The specter dashed back, its form beginning to break down completely. It was barely humanoid anymore, looking closer to the shadow of an evil tree with six wispy branches.

It hung in the air, a pair of empty, dark pits the only concrete resemblance left to Orexis Prime. It watched us with its hollow eyes, like a confused animal, and I began to wonder if it had gone catatonic.

"No, no, no, no," the echoing, hissing voice of the specter whispered in our ears. "I am not this thing..." It spoke the words quietly, with no strength or energy behind them—like a weary old man muttering about the regrets of his past. "I am... I am... Orexis... I *wish* to be Orexis. I do not *want* to be... a phantom..."

The dark pits on its vague face shuddered, then narrowed. The smaller hands re-solidified and began to glow. It pointed ten mana-charged fingers at us.

But a man fell from the sky and cleaved the specter in half, his blade anointed with gray mana.

Varrin landed in a deep squat, c'thonic bone blade buried an inch into the ground at the specter's feet. The false Orexis was split down the center, from head to groin, the light of its fingertips extinguished. Its two halves floated apart, then dissipated into the air like windswept smoke.

*Gracovus* hovered back to me, and I sent it into home position along my armguard. Me, Xim, and Varrin watched the air where Orexis had been a moment before, waiting for the gotcha, but none came.

I took a deep, rasping breath, wet with blood and maybe some decayed lung matter.

"Is flying on the shield fun?" I asked, eyes watering from resisting the urge to cough. I didn't want to see what would come out if I did. Varrin frowned at me.

"It's a little awkward," he said. "My feet are too close together for a balanced stance."

I nodded, looking at the pitted and scored slabs on my armguard.

“Maybe Papa can make it bigger,” I said.

Then, I puked blood, and we began figuring out how to not die. Again.