

A damn popup ad appeared in my field of view, and a lance of anger ran down my core. I thought we'd moved past those things. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd seen a popup ad that wasn't just a computer virus that directed you to a scam call center. Nowadays we had cookie banners that demanded your consent every fucking time you visited a website, not *popup* ads inviting you to spend \$9.99 a month on scandalous images of questionable quality. It was a more civilized era!

However, as I studied the invading text, I realized it was not an ad, but a notification of some sort. It didn't have a solid background or blinking colors. I could look away from it and it didn't incessantly follow my eyes. There were no demands for me to call IT and acquire antivirus software with the only payment option being gift cards to a popular electronics brand. No, this looked like normal text. Non-intrusive, but easy to spot.

It was too bad that I had no idea what it said.

That somehow got me *more* irritated. I looked over the letters and numbers, but they were nonsensical. I knew that there were words, but I couldn't quite get them to process. That was when a memory slapped me in the face like I was a window AC unit with a bad rattle. It shook loose some of the gears in my head and my present circumstances reasserted themselves.

Some time ago, I'd woken up after dying to a tree and found a book. Believing what I was experiencing to be a dream, I challenged the assumption by trying to read the book. I couldn't read in my dreams, so if I could not read the book, that was evidence that I was dreaming. At first, I *couldn't* read the book, until whatever linguistic knowledge that had been inserted in my head applied itself and I *could* read the book. It was one of my first memories after coming to Arzia and appearing inside the Creation Delve.

I didn't need prescription glasses. I wasn't in my kitchen. I wasn't even on Earth. My brain flashed through a series of disconnected events—Hognay, Demarsus, fighting bat people, The Cage, The Mimic, Sam'lia, Littans being assholes—until I was back in the present. I was standing deep inside the woods in Eschendur, wondering why my thoughts were so scattered. My anger grew.

I struggled to consider two ideas. One: I was being attacked mentally. Two: head trauma. Considering my inability to see anything to my right, I explored the second option. I reached up and felt around my right eye, feeling something slimy on my cheek. There was a deep gash just below and above my socket, and I tentatively poked a finger deeper. My finger kept going, and I decided that my eye was completely gone before I got far enough in to truly touch anything.

I reached around to the back of my head. I still had my hood equipped since it was separate from my mangled chest piece and I could still wear it with the shitty steel cuirass I had on. The hood was no longer up, having been knocked back by something. Thus, the back of my head was exposed, and I quickly found an unwelcome hole. I briefly probed its edges to get an idea of the size, feeling pretty disconnected from the experience. It was about as big as a teacup saucer.

It appeared that a non-trivial amount of my brain had recently exploded out of my skull. That explained the confusion.

But this realization caused me to become more confused about how I wasn't *more* confused. Shit, I should be unconscious, not exploring the boundaries of a severe head wound. I struggled to process and the difficulty invited more rage, which threatened to overtake me. Finally, another memory bubbled up: the desire to survive a lucky headshot. An evolution I'd picked a long time ago. I didn't have the capacity to figure it out any further, so I moved.

All of this occurred in a handful of seconds, while several people moved around me nearby. Someone had a hand on my left forearm, bringing it around in front of me. I looked up to see a woman with unrecognizable features. Not unrecognizable as in I didn't know who she was, unrecognizable in that her features didn't make sense. Eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth, they were all there but they didn't coordinate into something that I could make sense of.

Her soul, however, was very familiar.

Xim was talking to me, her soul flaring in distress. My left arm—which she was shaking—was equipped with the armguard that contained Gracovus, so I deployed the shield in front of me. Probably a good idea if someone was trying to take my head off. Xim also sent a warm pulse that I recognized as healing through my body. The numbers on my notification changed, but I still didn't know what they meant. I also didn't regain sight in my right eye, so whatever she was doing wasn't entirely working out. My feelings continued to boil over.

She left, and I watched her rush over to another stranger. A big guy, wrapped in Varrin's soul. Varrin was gesturing and looked to be speaking authoritatively. A woman who was Etja flew away into the woods under his direction, and a floating monster came toward me. It glowed with Shog's presence and stood in front of my shield.

A tree to my left exploded, and Varrin dropped to the ground. He looked up and into the distance, then at me, clutching the right side of his rib cage. The armor there was punctured.

Someone had tried to kill me, that much was clear. Now they were trying to kill everyone else. That thought cut through a lot of the noise. It also sent me over the edge.

The visual information I was getting from my remaining eye was difficult to parse and incomplete. I ignored it, then cranked the sensitivity of my Soul-Sight up farther than I'd ever gone. I pushed the ability until I was spiritually blinded by the existences around me, and then I began to filter.

The forest was a cacophony of presence. Thousands of entities bombarded me with their essence, their souls emerging from the ether to be seen, heard, and felt. Most prominent were my allies, with Shog directly in front of me being dominant. The Sight was not based in the physical world, however. The spatial relationship between myself and the soul that I perceived mattered, but it mattered much less than it would for normal vision. I was not receiving light reflected from a physical object. That there was a barrier between myself and what I Saw did not matter, even if that barrier was another soul.

With a mental command, Shog's soul diminished within my senses. I pierced through it to see the forest and the tens of thousands of souls within. Creatures as small as insects were alight with spiritual life and even the plants had a small shimmer to them, but it was all still faded and obscured by the souls of my other allies. Even from a distance, the power of my party's souls interfered. I attenuated my awareness of all my companions, reducing the obfuscation and bringing everything else into focus. Then, I cut away anything too weak to be a threat.

A single soul became clear, but it was distant. They were strong and made little effort to hide, perhaps feeling secure in how far they were from me. This may have been the attacker, a sniper of some kind perhaps, but I ignored them for the moment. There was something else; the barest pressure on my skin, the slightest metaphysical scent in the air. I focused, bringing See to bear on anything hidden through stealth, invisibility, or illusion. A few seconds passed, and then four new presences emerged.

Their distances varied. One was beside the far-off entity that I had first detected. Two more were to my north and south, approximately half as far. One, though, was very close. A few hundred feet at most. I locked onto them, then used Reveal to bring this information to my allies.

I cast Shortcut twice and was behind the person. I looked down at them, one eye evaluating their physical appearance as my Soul-Sight bore into everything else. I still had the sensitivity cranked to an unreasonable level, only able to tolerate it because of how much information I was discarding. This still showed me more than I'd ever experienced with ability as I studied the male Littan before me.

He was small and lithe, wearing leathers with dark colors that matched the forest. He was absolutely silent, not even letting out a sharp breath when I appeared. His soul was Silver, level 7 and thirty Delves strong. He was well-trained, dedicated, and loyal. He had been calm before, but my appearance was like a rock across a still pond, and his soul rippled with alarm. I was momentarily captivated by the level of information available from his soul and took no action. I felt I could go deeper, and find even more.

He wouldn't panic, but he would flee. I saw his spiritual self tense before his body, and with the way the soul gracefully coiled up, I knew that he would be fast. Like an elusive prey animal.

He cast a spell and became invisible while at the same time, a rune lit up at my feet. An explosion engulfed me in fire, but my Soul-Sight did not falter. He sprang away, moving faster than even Varrin through the thick foliage. He covered a hundred feet in a second as I doused myself with a pulse of Dispel, and then I Shortcut directly in front of him.

He ran into my outstretched palm, unable to change trajectory on a dime to avoid the still-smoking limb. As I stiff-armed the man running at over sixty miles per hour, I cast Oblivion Orb. Anger continued to boil through my addled mind, and I mana-shaped the ability, pumping far more mana into it than I needed. I wasn't thinking about the other enemies or the potential for reinforcements. I didn't care about the expense or resource management. My universe was the death of the man in front of me.

Oblivion Orb let out a sharp *snap* as it removed the man's chest from existence. The rest of him continued forward with his momentum, severed arms clunking off my sides. His head flew off into the dark over my shoulder as his legs crashed into the ground and tumbled for a dozen feet. I spared no further thoughts for the Littan as the light of his soul extinguished, and I turned to find my next target.

I looked to the southern presence, but Varrin and Etja were on their way to intercept. Shog flew directly for the most distant pair of targets with Xim along for the ride, but it would take them a couple of minutes to get there. That left me with the northern soul, a quarter of a mile away.

I used Shortcut seven times, appearing beside the Littan in half as many seconds. He was buried beneath leaves and dirt, half submerged in muddy water. He was also Silver, level 7, with exactly thirty Delves done. He was alarmed that I'd located and teleported to him in a handful of seconds, but he also did not panic, even calmer than the first Littan.

I peered at him through the muck and paused to see yet another curious thing. A thin thread of spiritual essence traveled from his head and into the forest. It went south,

toward the presence being approached by Varrin. I studied it while I summoned Somnres into my hand, intrigued by what it might be.

I felt Etja and Varrin engage, their souls thrumming with the power of a series of abilities, and the southern presence disappeared. The thread also disintegrated, indicating that whatever had been happening, the southern entity had been the source. The man at my feet began to lose his composure, and I knew that he would attack. I also knew that he was not built for damage.

He rolled over in a flash, and a pulse of energy washed over me. I got a spell notification that I, again, couldn't read, but I *felt* what the ability had done. It exposed my weaknesses. It wouldn't help him. He fired a crossbow at my face and a spell at my chest at the same moment.

I tilted my head to the side, avoiding the arrow, but the spell landed like a spear in my ribs. It hurt, but it barely registered. Not because my mental state was ill-equipped to process pain—it was—but because it was too weak to matter.

I responded by throwing Somnres into the man at point blank, layering skills for a Void Hammer. The dirt and mud exploded as the hammer impacted his solar plexus, crushing his body down into the filth as Oblivion Orb carved a bowling ball out of his core. There was no excuse for level 7s to have so little health or defense. This crew was obviously designed for stealth and ambush, but still, one needed to be able to survive getting caught out.

I turned east, toward the remaining pair of ambushers, and waited for a few seconds. Finally, Gracorus crashed through the brush and landed at my feet. These targets were more than a mile away, and even through my anger and clouded thoughts, I knew that spending 200 mana on chained Shortcuts wouldn't be wise. Gracorus wouldn't be much cheaper to use if I flew the entire distance, but I had a third option.

I stepped onto Gracorus and rose above the treetops. The cold, seething anger still pulsed through me, and though my thought process had grown slightly more organized, I was still acting with almost no inhibitions. Otherwise, I would have never taken the risk I was about to take.

I felt my connection to Shortcut, primed the mana, and then began to break the spell.