

When I first noticed the powerful soul, it was little more than a glimmer along the distant horizon. Had I been using my eyes and relying on Soul-Sight as I had in the past, the entity would have been obscured by the thick vegetation of the Eschen swamplands. I wouldn't have seen it until we were much closer. However, I'd learned a few lessons from my recent experience of having a vacuous head.

One curiosity after the headshot was that, while I hadn't been able to recognize faces, I *had* been able to recognize souls. One possible explanation was that such information was processed by a different part of my brain from faces, one that hadn't been injured. But, the majority of my mental faculties had been hindered to some extent.

I wasn't a neurologist, but I was pretty sure several processes had been interrupted even though the corresponding structure in my brain hadn't been directly injured. Perhaps there was a ripple effect from the trauma, and the jolt to my head caused widespread damage to my entire brain beyond the parts directly impacted by the ballista bolt. Maybe my outrageous constitution allowed me to stay conscious during the 'reset' that might occur when getting knocked out, which caused temporary mayhem across the board. Either way, Soul-Sight not only remained unaffected but was more potent than it had ever been.

What I thought to be more likely was that the information from Soul-Sight wasn't all being processed by my physical brain.

I hadn't suffered any of the deleterious effects from Soul-Sight while it went on auto-pilot, such as feeling overwhelmed or painfully blinded. Souls were crystal clear, with more information available than in the past. I could sort and filter the sight effortlessly, guiding the skill with incredible nuance. I could do this, even though I couldn't read or recognize the faces of my party members.

Soul-Sight connected directly to the soul, and I began to work under the theory that much of the information passed directly into my spiritual self. The sensations I'd experienced were closer to impressions and intuition than rationalized concepts born of higher reasoning. I felt like it all needed to reach my brain eventually, but I wondered whether my wetware was getting in the way during the intake. Perhaps my overreliance on being cerebral was to my detriment in this instance.

So, I began trying to capture that feeling of mindlessness. I allowed the ability to guide itself, rather than trying to force technique or structure upon it. I let the sensations flow into me unfiltered and unopposed, and tried to limit my mind's involvement to receiving the fully-formed insights, rather than doing the processing itself.

Simply put, there'd been too many cooks in the kitchen. I amended the flow of information from hitting both my brain and soul simultaneously to having the soul take in the info first, which then sent it along to my brain, packaged up nice and neat.

Overall, this left me pondering how divorced my current philosophy of thought was from my Earth self. I'd never been religious or spiritual. I'd never believed in souls, karma, or gods. I'd developed some habits like meditation, but they were centered around the concrete psychological and physiological benefits that could be provided, not some metaphysical connection to my transcendental self.

Yet, here I was, allowing my soul to process spiritual information granted to me by a divine revelation while relegating my rational self to the role of observation. Of course, all of this was still based on hypotheses that could be tested and supported with quantifiable results, so it would be silly to try and live my life the way I had on Earth. When faced with new evidence... so on and so forth.

I sent a message to Nuralie via Grotto about the mysterious presence. We'd finished our western route and moved north toward the Delve and the Littan operating base. The soul wasn't directly in our path, but it wasn't too far off course.

"Why would you want to approach something like that?" Nuralie thought to me through our Grotto relay. *"Are you certain that your brain grew back correctly?"*

[Hear me out,] I replied. [Unless the Empire suddenly has access to dozens more special Delves than the rest of the world, I don't think that it's a Littan. The feeling I get from it is closer to an entity like The Mimic.]

"This does not encourage me to get closer to it. The Mimic was... violent."

[The Mimic was testing us, not trying to kill us,] I thought back. [Well, maybe it was testing us by trying to kill us, but all of that was part of it deciding whether we were 'worthy' of information about phase two.]

"Even if it is something like The Mimic, why does that matter? We have the knowledge we need. Why put ourselves at risk?"

[There's a small army of Littan Delves around the entrance to the Delve. Our current plan to deal with that is to hope the level 34 isn't there and run in quick.]

"We have many ways to create distractions..."

[Individuals such as The Mimic do not exist to provide Delvers with conveniences,] Grotto interjected. *[They are arbiters of capability, the second filter that Delvers must pass through on their journey toward ascension.]*

[Yeah, but we don't need help with a *Delve*, we need help getting *inside* of a *Delve*. Wait, do you know what that thing might be?]

[I do not have any specific knowledge,] Grotto thought hesitantly. *[My duties always related to normal Delves. I did not manage any portion of the phase unlocks, although I have experienced them many times. Even if there is an Architect like The Mimic in this region, it would have no reason to assist you unless doing so was directly in line with its duties.]*

[Would it have a reason to *kill* us unless doing so was directly in line with its duties?]

[That is difficult to say. I would not think so unless you become an impediment. However, the personality of The Mimic appeared to be... unstable. I fear that whatever modifications the Architects have undergone to extend their lives have had some unintended side effects. There is also no way to be certain that this creature is an Architect.]

"It is an unnecessary risk," thought Nuralie. *"We should investigate the Littan encampment before approaching something so powerful and unknown."*

[Fine, fine. Let's have you scout out the Littans. We can pitch the idea to the rest of the party when we get closer.]

With my idea shot down, we continued onward. As we went, the entity began moving east of its original position, placing it closer to our current path. We steered ourselves slightly westward to put some extra distance between ourselves and the mystery presence. The adjustment was met with no change, so I thought that it might have been a coincidence.

However, as we drew near, the soul began approaching us at an incredible speed. I began to suspect that whatever the thing was, it didn't share our desire not to say hello.

We stopped, and I opened the Closet.

"We've got incoming," I said into the portal.

"Littans?" asked Varrin.

“Possibly, but it may also be an ancient being of vast power that’s lost its mind in its pursuit of eternal life.”

“Normal enough,” said Xim as she walked to the portal’s edge. She looked down. “We’re still in the canopy.”

“We can get the drop on ‘em,” I said.

“If they are “incoming”,” said Varrin, “then why do you think we’d have the element of surprise?”

“Just because they know our location doesn’t mean they know our elevation.”

Varrin sighed, but the group gathered up at the portal’s edge, ready to move when something showed itself.

Nuralie was once again more than a mile north of us, and the thing seemed content to ignore her. It grew closer and closer, but I soon realized that it was approaching a spot slightly southeast of us. It came to a stop a few hundred yards away, and three new souls burst to life in my vision.

I immediately recognized one soul and could guess who the second belonged to. The third also felt familiar, but I couldn’t place it.

Three level 17 golds began duking it out with the unknown entity, and the sounds of their battle echoed through the forest.

“What happened?” Varrin whispered. The screeching sound of metal on metal came from the distance with the intensity of a high-speed car crash.

“I believe the mysterious interloper is fighting Tavio and two of his party members,” I said. “Gharifon and... someone else. I know that I’ve run into them, but I can’t think of who it might be.”

We listened as trees crashed to the ground, accompanied by urgent shouts.

“Do you think they know we’re here?” asked Varrin.

“Were they tracking us?” asked Xim.

I let the questions hang, thinking them over. It was possible we’d been tracked, but I didn’t believe we’d have been allowed to make so much progress if the Littans knew where we were. Why would they wait, especially if a group of three level 17s were on our tail? Maybe they were unwilling to take any chances, trying to let us walk into an

overwhelming ambush. The Littan encampment was still another six hours away, but it was possible they'd mobilized a force to encircle us.

I pinged Nuralie, but she didn't see anyone approaching from further north. She also wasn't being accosted and stopped her advance to dig in beneath a thick network of tree roots. If anyone could find her, it was because they already knew she was there.

"We could withdraw into the Closet," said Varrin. "Let this play out and check in after a few hours."

"I don't want to leave Nuralie out here alone," I said.

"You can keep up through Grotto," said Varrin. "If there's an issue, we can emerge in seconds."

"Grotto can talk to me from anywhere inside the Closet because my inventory interface covers the whole interior," I said. "Otherwise, his psychic range is more limited. If I go inside the Closet while he's out here, it might cut off the connection. Eschundur isn't part of my inventory."

"I see."

"Let's wait it out," said Xim. "Keep silent, and be ready to retreat."

I nodded and kept watching the souls. I briefly considered how the level 17s had come out of nowhere. Soul-Sight was still susceptible to some stealth effects until I focused on piercing them, which meant their whole party had been hiding for some reason. That supported the idea that they'd been tailing us, but I still wasn't convinced. Before I could think too deeply about the matter, the battle grew closer.

A buff, brown-furred Littan in full plate shot through the foliage like a bullet a hundred feet from us. It was Tavio, and his body crashed through a three-foot-thick tree trunk, reducing it to splinters. Despite the abuse, the man managed to keep hold of his radiant spear and immediately kicked back up to his feet. He was covered in muck and spat out a wad of blood.

A massive gout of blue vapor erupted to the east, and plants began to wilt on contact. Entire trees started to creak and tip after a handful of seconds, their rotting trunks no longer able to bear their weight. Reptiles and birds fell from the canopy in droves, and one massive, six-legged salamander crawled from a hole in the mud to slither a few feet before collapsing.

From the mist, a figure emerged, moving so fast that the cloud swirled and began to disperse. Its form was a blur, but it appeared to be wearing ragged, stitched-together armor the color of a dying elephant's skin. Its face was a pale, emotionless mask that glistened as though it were made of porcelain, and its arms were exposed tendon and muscle with a set of bone blades at the ends. This was the entity I'd been tracking. I quickly tried to identify it.

The Operator: Architect, Level 24

This was the thing that Zenithar Dal had been talking about? The Operator was one of the Architects?

Tavio began to speak, but couldn't get a word out before the figure closed the distance. The Operator struck at Tavio, who blocked with the haft of his spear and was sent careening through the swamp again, out of sight.

The azure cloud gathered itself back up and compressed as a Littan in bruise-colored robes appeared. The vapor formed a sphere upon the man's palm. It was Gharifon, and he pointed a finger at Tavio's attacker.

The sphere warped and wrapped itself around Gharifon's digit, which glowed an eerie green. The colors mixed, and a tainted cone shot out from the Littan, leaving everything in its path rotting and decaying. The Operator leaped upward, out of the attack's path. Its eyes flashed with a light bright enough to leave me blinking away the after-image, and Gharifon's cone disappeared. The Operator kicked off from a tree with enough force to shatter the entire trunk, the top half of the tree tumbling away. It hurtled toward Gharifon, but as its blades began to close on the caster's neck, the man disappeared in a pool of shadow.

The ground exploded as The Operator landed, and it immediately raised its blades to intercept a half dozen flying needles. Arms moved in a blur, and bright sparks flashed as each projectile was cleanly knocked aside. I scanned the trees, looking for the source of the attack, and spotted the third soul, though it was dim and subdued.

The Operator's flesh began to slither along its arms, the bones and tendons reshaping to replace the blade with a crossbow in under a second. It fired a dozen bolts into the forest in less time than it had taken to transform the limb. The dim soul moved as though to dodge, but they flashed with pain as at least one of the bolts landed. The

figure fell to the ground, but Gharifon's soul appeared for an instant next to the wounded person, and then both of them were gone.

The Operator watched the trees for a breath, then lowered its limb and looked around.

Tavio's group did not reappear. I scanned the surroundings for any signs of their souls but saw nothing. Either they'd gone back into hiding, or Gharifon had teleported all three of them away.

I held my breath as The Operator continued to peer around the swamp, then I glanced at my party members. Xim and Varrin looked on with stoic intensity, whereas Etja was wide-eyed and curious. Varrin looked up at me, and ever so slowly put one finger to his lips in a "keep quiet" gesture. I tried to convey how little I needed that warning through the silent language of expressive eyebrows, then turned my head back toward The Operator with sloth-like speed.

The entity's limbs molded and twisted until they were humanoid arms, all traces of its flesh-and-bone weaponry gone. It took a few heavy steps north but paused and looked around again.

Its soul flared, and I felt a pressure wash over me that sent chills down my back. It looked up in our direction, meeting my eyes through the leaves and branches. Its porcelain lips never moved, but a voice like the grave filled the swamp.

"More scavengers to send back to the maker?" it asked.

Before I had time to think, a hand was at my throat.