

“You think the whole Delve is a mimic?” Varrin asked. His tone was genuine, without a hint of incredulity toward my theory. It said a lot about our experiences as a group that the idea could be floated without much pushback.

“Why doesn’t it swallow?” asked Nuralie. “If we’re inside already.”

“Or smoosh us?” said Xim. “Or send bigger mimics?”

“It may not be the *whole* Delve,” I conceded. “Maybe it’s like a parasite, and it’s woven mimic-ness throughout.”

“Why send one mimic at a time?” asked Varrin. “If it has a much larger central mass, it could overwhelm us.”

“One mimic hasn’t given us *too* much trouble,” Xim added. “It should know that by now. Sending them single-file just keeps us on edge.”

“That could be the goal,” I said. “Wear the enemy down on the approach. Only commit to a larger engagement once it knows we’re weakened.”

“A losing plan against us,” said Varrin. “Our party excels at resource generation.”

“Health and stamina, sure,” I said. “We still have the opportunity to improve with mana.”

“I don’t think you understand what normal values are,” said Varrin.

“I know what they are, I just don’t care,” I said. “You’ve got a good point either way. The mimic may be used to dealing with ‘normal’ parties. A few sneak attacks on the tank, some jump-scaries to rattle the spell-slingers until they’re trigger-happy, soon enough, the party would be low on health and mana.”

“But not us,” said Xim. “It’s taken a bite out of you four times by this point, Arlo. I haven’t even had to heal you yet. Or anyone else for that matter.”

Xim looked conflicted over that fact. Not needing the healer to heal was usually the sign of a clean Delve. Superior tactics and skill won the day, with no injury serious enough that magic had to get involved. With our party, if Xim needed to break out the heals then we were taking the kind of damage that would put most groups six feet under.

Part of our group's healing came from my aptly named aura, *Who Needs a Cleric?* It gave bonus hourly health regen to everyone in the party equal to my Fortitude, which was presently a stout thirty-eight. I also had a modification to my tenth level Fortitude Evolution *I Can Do This All Day*, which I received for completing *The Cage*.

At base, the evolution doubled my health and stamina regen from Fortitude. The modification, *We Can Do This All Day*, caused one nearby ally to regain health or stamina whenever I took damage, equal to fifty percent of the damage taken. My health regen was massive, and my proclivity for becoming injured was high, so this ability went a long way toward keeping my allies topped off, although Varrin was usually the one getting the biggest benefits from it.

Varrin and Xim had both received Fortitude evolution modifications from *The Cage* as well, which further enhanced our party's recovery.

Varrin's original evolution was already a resource buff:

Deep Breaths: Your stamina recovery is tripled while you are outside of combat and not engaged in strenuous activity.

The key word in that ability was 'recovery'. It applied to all sources that gave back stamina, not just regeneration. The modification he received also shared the wealth with the party:

Let's All Take Some Deep Breaths: If your stamina is full, your nearest ally who is missing stamina gains the benefit of Deep Breaths.

That made for a fun symbiotic relationship where the damage I took in combat kept Varrin's stamina healthy, and then after the fight I could take advantage of *Deep Breaths* to get my own stamina back. We even tried to munchkin the ability by having Varrin punch me in the face to get his stamina back faster so that I could then get *Deep Breaths* sooner, but, sadly, my ability didn't trigger if an ally was the one dealing me damage.

Varrin was insistent that we keep experimenting with the technique, though...

Xim's Fortitude Evolution augmented the healing she *received*:

***Receptive Healing:* Charisma-based healing is twice as effective when used on you.**

And her modification, again, spread the love around.

***Instructive Healing:* Whenever you recover health in an amount greater than the health that you are missing, 25% of the excess recovery is granted to the next closest ally who is missing health.**

Once more, the key word there was “recover”. It didn’t only apply to healing, but all sources that gave back health. Thus, while Xim was at full health, 25% of the bonus she got from my healing aura, along with 25% of her natural health regen, was granted to the next closest person who was missing health. Normally, that was me.

The typical resource flow went something like: I get stabbed, grant stamina to Varrin based on the damage from getting stabbed, get my stamina regen buffed by Varrin once we killed what stabbed me, and also get extra health regen from Xim to recover from being stabbed.

For mana, our benefits were not as great, but still robust. My personal mana regen was often higher than it should have been due to the *Ambient Absorption* trait from my *Bonded Familiar* passive. If there was excess dimensional mana around, I sucked that shit up. I also had a Wisdom evolution that doubled the mana regen I got from the stat.

If you look closely, you can see that there’s a theme to my build...

We then had Nuralie’s mana potions and the fact that the lowest WIS score in the party was a ten, which meant that everyone had some mana and regen to play around with. Overall, our party’s total mana regen output was much higher than it had any right to be. With all our powers combined, we were swimming in resource pools.

If the mimic’s strategy was to wear us down, it was doomed to fail, unless it started coming at us with a lot more dakka.

“Maybe it’s feeling us out,” said Xim. “Seeing what we can do.”

“Probably both,” I said. “Testing our capabilities while trying to drain resources.”

Varrin grunted.

“If it’s as big as you say, one would think it wouldn’t feel pressured to use such tactics.” He leaned back against a wall, eyes studying the bare ceiling. “Powerful monsters rarely act so reservedly.”

“The Delve portal is restricted to level six or less,” I said. “Even if we assume that this is the big daddy of all level six Delves, we should still outclass it with our stats.”

“Stats aren’t everything,” Varrin said, eyes narrowing as he pushed off from the wall. “And these are *platinum* Delves, Arlo. Level restrictions mean far less than they do on lower difficulties. Your intrinsic skills are *half* of what they should be to Delve this high, even with our training. None of us even have a full set of active skills.”

“I get it,” I said. “Believe me, I’m not advocating that we be rash. I’m just saying that whatever creature is in here has likely learned caution. It may be a *big* mimic, but that doesn’t mean that it’s an *overconfident* mimic.”

Varrin sighed and leaned back again.

“Assume the enemy is as intelligent and well-prepared as *you* are,” he said. “If not more so.”

“If I were a mega mimic,” I began, “a *king* mimic, hiding in a Delve, and a full party of Delves came knocking, I would want to do some recon. I may be strong, but Delves are dangerous. Luckily, as a king mimic, I can send my mimic pawns to test the waters. That’s what it looks like has been happening.”

“Don’t forget about the Delve Core,” said Xim. “It could be directing the mimics itself. Trying to give us an ‘appropriate’ challenge.”

“Would a Delve Core be intentionally sub-optimal?” I asked. “I feel like it would do everything it could to kill us with the tools available.”

“That’s not what I meant. We’re attributing strategy to a mana-monster. The core may be the one in charge.”

“Or a rogue Delver,” said Varrin. “Or a godly avatar.”

“Summoned villain from another world,” I suggested. “Aliens. Same thing, really.”

“The mimic is what’s in front of us,” said Varrin. “We have no evidence to suggest that an external entity is governing its actions. We should remain aware of the possibility, but proceed as though the mimic is our primary opponent.”

“Then what have we discovered so far about mimics?” I asked. “Besides their love of cultural treasures.”

“Resistant to physical,” said Varrin. “Possibly immune. Resistant to any damage that takes advantage of normal biology.”

“No heart to stab, no brain to concuss,” I said. “Makes my *Oblivion Orb* a lot less deadly. I’d call that dimensional resistant.”

“Divine works,” said Xim. “As long as the deity supports killing mimics. Sam’lia was happy to smite it.”

“We should assume spiritual is less effective than divine,” said Varrin. “If it lacks a soul, spiritual attacks would primarily be interrupting mana flow through the mana-matrix. It may hinder its shapeshifting, but wouldn’t cause any real harm.”

“That version of the mimic makes me metaphysically uncomfortable,” said Xim. “If it *does* have a mana-matrix, then there *must* be a soul for the matrix to flow into and out of. Otherwise, that would be like a floating web of mana-veins with no flesh and blood surrounding it.”

“That’s a freaky mental image,” I said. “What I’m hearing is that divine and mystical attacks should be preferred. Unless we find out that the king mimic has a soul, whereas its minions do not.”

“Good point,” said Varrin.

“*Magic Blast* is mystical!” said Etja. “That must be why my beam worked so well. I can use my *Incarnation* passive to combine it with *Nullify*.”

“Magic laser with countermagic properties,” I said. “Should play hell with its shapeshifting.”

“Wait,” said Nuralie, looking at Xim. “Mana flows from the mystical realms, through the divine, into the spiritual realm, and then out into the physical world. But, mana can also flow through the dimensional void to get to the physical realm.” Pause. “It could have mana nodes instead of a mana-matrix.”

The conversation then devolved into the nuances of the five-school model of magic, which is as exciting as an intriguing textbook. Suffice it to say, Nuralie's suggestion required specific conditions that we hadn't observed with the mimic.

As the conversation moved on from how to kill the mimic more effectively, to how to find and defend ourselves against the mimic, I began to develop a feeling of being exposed. My gut tingled and the hair along my neck stood on end. It was a sensation I'd learned to trust, and as the others talked, I began scanning the room. I'd barely begun when I found the face watching us.

It was on the wall behind Varrin. While the large warrior leaned back against the stone surface, a woman's countenance had emerged just behind his waist. It was mostly obscured, but a slight step to one side gave me a better angle on it.

Her eyes were a little too large, and the pupils bent outward to the side ever so much, not fixed on a single point. Her mouth hung slightly open in a pleasant smile, though her lips were too big, and a bit of drool ran down her chin. Her exposed teeth were two rows of wide and uniform incisors, with no canines or variation that I could see. Her nose was tiny and pert, but glistened as though made of marble. A smattering of dark freckles covered her cheeks, perfectly mirrored on both sides. Each element alone would have looked a touch out of place on a person's face, but together, they were a horrifying conglomeration of features.

"Varrin," I said, "I need you to step away from the wall."

The big guy gave me a questioning look, but immediately popped off the wall and took two steps away, then turned. The rest of the party followed our eyes until we were all staring at the woman on the wall. Weapons were readied and Etja's fingers glowed, but I held up a hand and signaled a halt.

The face turned its exotropic eyes to me, then rolled them slowly over the group. A stringy line of spittle dripped from its chin onto the ground, and its smile widened. It began to speak, its voice high-pitched and barely audible, like it was talking to itself. I strained to listen, but the language was unfamiliar. The face paused and looked over us again, then began speaking with a different cadence. It sounded like an entirely different language, but still one I didn't recognize.

After a minute of rotating through different tongues, the face finally began speaking in one that I recognized, having learned it earlier that year. Loson'binora, Nuralie's native language.

The scaled alchemist took a sharp step backward when the face first began to utter phrases in the language of Eschendur, lowering the arrow she had nocked and pointing at the thing. The others took note of her shock but stayed focused on the creature, weapons and spells ready to splatter the face if need be. I shrugged off the surprise and my mind caught up to the words being spoken.

“...time to be that I have seen them. Too much time to have seen them. I have not seen them in time to be... it has been... it has been time, too long, I have forgotten...”

The words were droned and the face stopped and started like it were malfunctioning or having a stroke. I eventually realized that the stutters were an attempt at the loson-style pauses that Nuralie was prone to, but it was failing at using them properly, just as it was failing to make any sense at all.

As we watched, the face began to swell and bulge out from the wall until an entire head was revealed, the sides of it lined with geometrically perfect scales. It made a harsh retching noise and slime poured from its mouth. It licked its lips with a long and rounded tongue, then continued.

“It has been time... too long a time... since I have seen proper Delvers...” it said, then smiled broadly once the words were out. One of the eyes drooped, then snapped back up into place. “A face, a face, difficult to see, I don’t see... like this anymore...”

“Uh,” I began, then cleared my throat and dropped into the dulcet tone of Loson’binora. “Hello, are you the mimic?” Pause. “That we’ve been fighting?”

The face smacked its lips a few times.

“Mimic, a m-mimic, a w-word...” it stuttered, then its voice became loud and confident. “System Inquiry: Mimic.”

My eyebrows shot up as its lazy eyes began moving over unseen text. The thing had System access, and I began to wonder if Xim had been spot on with her guess at the Delve Core being in charge.

“Yes,” said the face, and its features bunched together as though five different people were each in control of a specific part, trying to make it scowl. “A mimic... poor choice of word...”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Is there something you wanted to talk about?” Pause. “Or are you here to try and kill us again?”

The face moved its wet lips back and forth, and its cheeks puffed in and out a few times.

“No,” it said.

“No?”

“Not yet.”

“To which part?”

The face smiled wider, and three monstrous arms grew from the ground at my feet, each as long as my whole body. One grabbed my neck, and the others each took one of my arms, pulling them back behind me. The hand at my throat squeezed, and my vision was filled with squirming dark spots.