

**You've entered an area with a very high concentration of Dimensional mana.  
Bonus mana regeneration capped at 10xWIS.**

**Current mana regeneration: 125/hour**

**You have survived the notice of a Divine being. You are granted +1 LCK!**

I exited the Delve portal like a man doing a backward dive onto pavement. Well, it wasn't *like* a man doing a backward dive onto pavement. I *was* a man doing a backward dive onto pavement. Or, whatever the Delve equivalent of pavement was.

It was hard and hurt like hell is what I'm saying.

The portal I came out of was a ragged tear in space, its edges warped and stuttering as the universe tried politely explaining to the aberration that it needed to stop existing while slamming the world in its face. The portal had its proverbial foot in the door, however, and it persisted, growing ever more turbulent and wild.

I tried to survey my surroundings, my body reminding me that approximately all of my bones were broken as I twisted my neck and torso to see anything other than the gaping wound in reality above me.

I was in some sort of corridor with an arched ceiling. Every inch of its dark surface was covered in glowing blue runes and sigils that served as the only light source beyond what little emanated from the portal. They thrummed and flickered, casting the passage into stuttering darkness. The floor rumbled in time with the lights, until they flared and returned to their normal luminance.

Didn't seem like a good sign, all things considered.

Otherwise, I seemed to be alone. I focused on my interface and brought up the list of notifications, clenching away the ice in my gut as I read through the ways the Delve had already tried to kill us. Ejection probably wasn't deadly... maybe? But atomization, collapsing a tunnel on top of us, or closing a dimensional portal while in transit sounded lethal.

At the bottom of the list, I found what I thought was my answer.

**You are being subjected to a non-consensual dimensional effect.**

**Subracial Bonus *From the Beyond* activated!**

**You gain 50% resistance to the dimensional effect.**

**You have been ejected from the dimensional buffer.**

Either I got shat out a little earlier than everyone else while the Delve decided what form of annihilation to try next, or I'd ended up in a completely different area. I really hoped it wasn't the latter. Playing through solo missions during a party-centric campaign was pretty frustrating. I already had my single-player session with Artemix, after all. Getting split from the group I *just* pieced back together would be shit for pacing.

Varrin's ass crashing into my face quelled my fears.

My nose held firm in its determination to be one of my twelve bones not yet fractured by the day's events, and Varrin rolled his armored frame off of me without skipping a beat. He was back on his feet, greatsword at the ready in less than a second.

"You're pretty good at holding onto that," I said. He glanced down at me, features taugt and skin clammy. I nodded at his sword.

"Eventually I'll find something I can kill with it," he said, a tremble entering his voice. "How bad are you hurt?"

I glanced at my health.

"I'm about seventy-nine percent hurt."

"Can you stand?"

"Legs are just as broken as they were five minutes ago."

"Never know with you," he said. "Figured you might have a *Broken* skill."

"You know," I said, "that's a pretty good one."

His eyes were fixed on the portal, unblinking. I let the silence hang, unable to keep the tension from my own body. Another form was ejected, but Varrin stayed his blade when he realized it was Xim. Nuralie followed a few seconds after.

Varrin helped Xim to her feet and the Cleric helped Nuralie stagger away from the portal. The Loson was grabbing at the sides of her head, still suffering from the intense sounds of Orexis' tantrum.

Finally, a fifth figure emerged, and its black soul filled the air.

Varrin immediately swung for the golem's neck, but the creature darted back. Still, the tip of his blade carved a line across its torso as the edge descended, and the creature let out a shriek. The level one was above its head, but the value flickered as it raised glowing fingers at Varrin.

### **1-44-1-3-1-98-1**

The runes along the walls and ceiling ignited into blue-white light, heat searing the air. Mana arced from the sigils and struck Etja's body, which warped and deformed beneath them. Varrin took advantage of the moment, bringing his blade to bear on the golem's center mass. It screeched and batted at the blade with its larger upper arms. The blade bit deep, and the creature staggered back.

Varrin used the momentum of the swing to rotate into another arcing strike, cutting another gash along the creature's chest, then followed up with a third. His attacks never ceased, each swing flowing into a new maneuver, rotating the massive blade with ever greater speed and power.

### **1-23-4-1-16-5-1**

Mana crackled out from the sigils again as the creature's level continued to dwindle. Varrin spun and brought the blade around with his full weight and speed, when the shadow of Orexis' soul split off from the golem.

The black shroud surrounding the golem took its own form, bearing the brunt of the arcing mana from the runes, and gripped Varrin's blade in distended, taloned hands. The swordsman's eyes went wide. Without my soul-sight, Varrin must have seen his blade freeze from some invisible force. Before the phantom of Orexis was able to capitalize on Varrin's shock, the runes unleashed another volley of mana.

Down the entire corridor, the blue sigils came to life, forcing me to shut my eyes against the flash. There was a violent crackle, followed by a series of pops before the light dimmed enough for me to see again.

Several of the runes had burnt out, showering the hall in gouts of sparks and evaporating mana. Ropey beams of energy wound around the dark form of Orexis' soul, now completely divorced from the golem's body. It flexed against the bonds, and the mana frayed, beginning to dissipate. Finally, the dark form wriggled free from the magical shackles, fleeing down the hall in an undulating spectral mass as power from the runes continued to arc toward it.

The golem collapsed to its knees, the black soul of Orexis no longer engulfing it. Now, all that was left was the gentle flux of platinum.

Its body morphed, one pair of hands receding into its torso, leaving it with four arms, rather than six. The elongated snout reshaped itself into the prior, vaguely feminine features, more similar to a mannequin than a person.

Then, there was that flicker again. The presence I'd felt when Orexis began animating the golem. It was distinct from the half-god, its essence alien from the endless hunger of Yearning. Still, there was a hint of the craving that Orexis held in his soul. A deep *desire*.

Orexis was gone, and whatever that left behind... I didn't know.

Varrin recovered from the violent light show, eyes squinting and still fixed on the golem. He brought his greatsword up, prepared to deliver the final blow.

I didn't know why I did it in the moment, but I activated *Gracovus* and willed the shield through the air, between Varrin's blade and the kneeling golem. There was a resounding clang, and a very confused Hiwardian swordsman, who turned his near seven-foot frame toward me, glaring.

"What are you doing, Arlo?" he said through clenched teeth.

"Yeah," said Xim. "What the fuck?"

"Wait! Just... wait," I said, scrambling to gather my thoughts. "I saw what Orexis did to... that." I gestured at the golem. "Orexis broke off a shard of his soul and stuffed it inside the thing, then wrapped it up with a platinum level."

"And?" Varrin hissed.

"It's gone now. The piece of Orexis' soul. It's gone. These wards, or mana-weaves. These runes and shit, they forced it out and now it's, I dunno, on the lam? Whatever that thing is, it isn't Orexis anymore."

"It's still a monster that he created." Varrin was looming over me now, doubly intimidating since I was lying on the floor with the bodily integrity of a bag of wet gravel.

"Is it?" I said. "Look, Varrin it's been... a shit fucking day." I pushed myself up to sitting. "I don't know what I expected going into this, and I feel like an idiot for not thinking it through better than I did. I wasn't signed up to do," I rolled my hand in the air, "whatever it was that we just did to those people in the cave. Before Orexis came in and stomped the floor with everyone."

I held Varrin's gaze, trying to appraise the man's mental state. He had to be hurting the worst out of all of us, but I still wanted to get through to him. I could tell that a lot was going on behind his ice-blue eyes, more than just the anger he was showing.

"I just want us to take a breath and think about what's going on before anyone else has to die," I said.

"Hold on," said Xim, looking up from casting *Heal* on Nuralie. The Loson had finally let her hands drop and was watching the exchange intently. Xim's eyes wandered as she considered my words. "The people who tried to kidnap you *told* you this was where they were taking you. They said *this* was where their 'client' was."

"Goddammit, I know," I said. "Look, Varrin, earlier today..." I hesitated, trying to focus on the main matter before me. "Earlier today, everything happened too fast. A lot of decisions were made in the moment." I took a deep breath, feeling the sharp pain of broken ribs along my side. "But right now, we have the time. We should at least ask some questions."

Varrin's seething gaze moved from me back to the golem. His blade dropped an inch.

"Think about this, if a half-god comes knocking and tells you to run some errands, are you turning him down?" I said. "A guy who turns people into vapor by taking a deep breath takes a seat at the farm table with your peasant family. Tells you he can make you a Delver, and asks you to kidnap a soft, rich-ass noble once in a while, what's your answer?"

Varrin opened his mouth but closed it again without saying anything.

"I'm not asking you to answer," I said. "I'm saying those are questions we should have been asking. The people in the cave could have been coerced. For all we know the

handful of golds back there were the ones working with Orexis and everyone else had come over for a family barbecue. My point is that sending heads rolling first and asking the corpses questions second is some Gestapo shit. Whatever god-juice was making that golem so strong is gone now, so I vote that we ask some questions *before* more executions.”

I took a deep breath, trying to settle myself. I hadn't had time to process the events of the day, and the words just leaped out of me. I hated feeling so out of balance, but I didn't regret advocating for mercy.

Varrin leaned back, bringing the blade of his greatsword to rest on his shoulder. His jaw was set, but the rage had been replaced by a grim, contemplative expression. He looked at Xim and Nuralie. Xim was looking the golem over, uncertain, but she nodded to Varrin. Nuralie shrugged.

With the matter tentatively settled, all four of us turned to look at the golem, which had moved to sit back on its knees. Its featureless face was turned toward us, all four hands resting on its thighs. *Gracorvus* still hovered above its head.

“Well then,” said Varrin. “Ask it some questions.”

I brought *Gracorvus* back to home position along my forearm, considering what angle to take. I decided to just muddle my way through.

“Hi,” I said. “I'm Arlo. Do you have a name?”

It stared at me for a moment, unmoving. Then a pair of lips formed on its face, and it spoke in a light tone.

“I am Etja,” it said.

“Hi, Etja. Do you know how you got here?”

Etja tilted its head to the side, then looked up toward the ceiling. The hole in reality we'd fallen out of still struggled to stay open.

“A portal,” Etja said.

“Ok. Do you remember what happened before that?”

Etja turned back to me, and a pair of milky eyes appeared on its face.

"I was animated. Then, I was inhabited." It held up a hand and turned it over, studying it with new eyes within which black irises formed. "Was it strange?"

"Strange?" I said. "Are you asking me?"

"No," Etja said. "I am asking myself. I think that it was strange."

"I'm... sure it was. Etja, what can you tell me about yourself?"

It looked back up at me from the hand, then glanced around at the others.

"I am a golem. I was created by an avatar of Yearning. My purpose was to serve as a vessel for Orexis. To assist in freeing the avatar of Release."

I resisted making a quip about releasing Release.

"Was?" I said. "Is that still your purpose?"

"No."

"Then what is?"

Etja paused to consider.

"I don't know. My bond with Yearning was severed. I should have become inanimate."

"Golems aren't fully autonomous," said Xim. "They require a host to direct them. If the host dies or the link is severed, the golem normally becomes dormant or fails entirely."

"Then why does it still work?" said Varrin.

"I'm guessing it's the platinum level," I said. "Delver levels add to your soul. At least, that's how it looks to me. It, er, she has platinum in her soul, but the base layer isn't there, which is strange. Does 'she' work for you, Etja?"

"My original physical structure," said Etja, "was modeled after a Mirtasian woman who served as Yearning's high priestess two millennia ago."

"The Mirtasians existed?" said Xim, getting a curious glint in her eye.

"They must have," said Etja. "Orexis had memories of them."

"What were they like? Did they really practice blood magic?"

"I," Etja paused, thinking, "I do not know. It feels like some things are... missing."

“Oh,” said Xim, deflating.

“Let’s get back on topic,” I said. “Do you have any sort of goal? Anything you’re trying to get done here?”

Etja looked around with her freshly minted eyes.

“I don’t think so. I don’t know where ‘here’ is.”

“Sure,” I said. “But, is there something you feel like you should be doing? Anything in particular you want?”

Two of Etja’s hands went to her stomach.

“I want... something to eat.”

I furrowed my brow.

“Do golems eat?” said Xim. “*What* would they eat?”

“I remember liking cheese,” said Etja.

“Cheese?” said Xim.

“Yes.” Etja nodded. “I think that my goal is to acquire cheese.”

“Well,” I said, pulling out my *Bag of Refreshments*, “the charcuterie gods have blessed you on this fine day.”

While I scrolled through my inventory trying to find something that would make for a good serving board, the portal spat out one final person. With a burst of feathers and a virulent slew of mental curses, Grotto flew out of the portal. He spun through the air and hit the ground, rolling onto his side.

*[I swear on the very names of the founders that I will find the core that manages this Delve and **dismantle** his chassis like I did with that traitor Nasro! What sort of a **maniac** sets the safety parameters on an inbound Delve portal so high that atomizing incoming Delvers is the primary fallback?! It’s **madness**!]*

“Hey, Grotto,” I said as the mini-c’thon popped up off the ground. He began running tendrils over his plumage to straighten the downy mess, then shot a look around the group.



*[You're all lucky that I was allowed to follow you into the portal because of my familiar bond with Arlo. Do any of you know what happens when a dimensional tunnel is collapsed on someone? No, of course you don't. No one does! They're dead! Probably.]*  
His eyes settled on Etja. *[I also notice a suspicious lack of **murder** happening to this fiend-spawn.]*

"This is Etja," I said. "I think she's probably ok now. Fun fact, she likes cheese." I settled on a small buckler I'd purchased during my mundane weapons buying spree and began making a spread from the contents of my endless bag of chow. I was mildly inconvenienced by a couple of fingers that I noticed were dislocated, but I made do.

Varrin stared coldly at Etja, but the golem watched him impassively in return. His eyes unfocused, until he was staring through the golem, perhaps feeling the day's events catching up to him.

The others passed an unconvinced look between them.

*[I do not think it is wise to allow such a dangerous entity to remain unrestrained. Its allegiance to Orexis is uncertain, and it may share that creature's violent tendencies.]*

"Grotto," I said, "if I drew the line for who I can be friends with at people who were recently in league with homicidal cutthroats, you wouldn't be here."

*[That was different.]*

"You're right. *You* had a choice. It sounds like Etja here was created just to be possessed by an evil deity."

I finished my board and slid it out toward the group.

"Charcute, anyone?"