

The 'malformed and misshapen' Mimic began to grow dozens of eyes over its body that spun and locked onto us, gummy and seeping thick fluid like they were infected. Limbs sprouted from its bulbous form with skinless muscle attached to yellowed bone. The ooze along its hands slimed up into the shape of various weapons: sword, shield, axe, spear, and claw. The weapons each had faces of their own, and lips stretched taut against bared teeth as the mouths of the lethal instruments muttered nonsensical phrases at us.

I had an excellent jeer to throw at The Mimic involving John Carpenter, but there was no more room for games. It was time to take this seriously.

"Ew," said Xim.

"Riiiiight?!" I said. "I've seen a lot of nasty shit in Arzia, but come. On."

Ok, maybe serious wasn't our thing.

"What's the play?" asked Varrin as The Mimic began sprouting ears, noses, and scales.

"Big Bang Attack," I said.

"It's immune to physical."

"Mana Bomb variant."

Varrin nodded. "Good call. Disrupt its shapeshifting. How much time do you need?"

"Twenty seconds."

"That's a big bomb."

"That's a big *mimic*."

Xim reached under the collar of her chainmail, touching a mana-weave that only she could activate.

"How come your favorite tactics," she said, grunting as she shoved her hand deeper to find the weave, "are the ones where you *aren't* the tank, Arlo? Gods above, this thing needs to be higher up!" She finally found what she was looking for, and her armor dropped away, leaving her wearing her mega-stretch bodysuit.

"Pitfalls of a dual spec," I said. "Besides, Varrin likes getting the practice in."

I dismissed the *Life Warden* skill from Etja, then cast it on Varrin. Now, half of the damage Varrin took from physical or dimensional transferred to me, the damage was reduced by my Physical Magic skill, and half of the damage I ended up taking from the transfer got refunded to Varrin as either stamina or health.

To translate, I just gave Varrin 70% DR.

Nuralie tossed the big guy a potion, and he popped the stopper, then downed it.

Nuralie's Night-Rush Potion

(Reluctantly formulated based on a Littan recipe)

Duration: 15 minutes

Your melee damage is doubled.

-5 To all physical defenses

INT-based skills require twice as much mana and stamina to use.

You gain Toxicity: 10

Xim held her scepter in the air and moved it in ritualistic patterns. Varrin's body began to glow with crimson light as she cast two buffs on him.

Sam'lia's Blessing of Hunger

Spiritual/Divine

Cost: 10 mana

Cooldown: 1 use per target per day

**Requirements: Fortitude 10, Charisma 10, Spiritual Magic 10, Divine Magic 20,
Patron Deity: Sam'lia, Revelation of the Stomach**

You grant a nearby ally a number of stacks of Blessed equal to your Divine Magic skill level, plus your Charisma, divided by five.

Whenever the target ally deals melee weapon damage to an enemy, they consume a portion of the enemy's life essence, dealing 1 additional damage and receiving 1 point of healing for each stack of Blessed they possess. The target ally may elect for their melee weapon attacks and damage to become Divine for so long as they are Blessed.

Sam'lia's Blessing of Pounding

Spiritual/Divine

Cost: 10 mana

Cooldown: 1 use per target per day

Requirements: Strength 10, Charisma 10, Spiritual Magic 10, Divine Magic 10, Patron Deity: Sam'lia, Revelation of the Heart

You grant a nearby ally one stack of Blessed.

The target ally gains one stack of Blessed each time they deal damage with a melee weapon attack, so long as they are Blessed.

Blessed: A Blessed person may spend any number of stacks of Blessed to increase their attack damage by 8 per stack spent, for one attack. Additionally, a Blessed person may spend any number of stacks of Blessed to reduce the damage received from an attack by 8 per stack spent, for one attack.

Tank'n'Spank Varrin launched at The Mimic, who was still graciously sculpting her body into the most awful form she could imagine. The man weighed almost four hundred pounds in full kit, and he was now moving at what our tests had determined to be ninety friggin' miles per hour toward his foe, wielding a mana-woven, seven-foot-long frozen steel greatsword, buffed with a wombo-combo of divine blessings that made every attack he landed deal more damage, and grant more healing than the last, while also under the influence of a got-damn berserker potion.

Point that fucker at the enemy and take a step back.

Varrin jumped, hurtling through the air as he rotated his body to bring his greatsword around on The Mimic's left side. The opener cleaved away two arms growing near The Mimic's central face, shoulders and all. Blood-red light erupted from the cut, and The Mimic let out a wrathful shriek as the biomass fell to the ground.

Despite all of Varrin's buffs, the severed limbs were not destroyed. They became amorphous and liquid, then rejoined The Mimic's body at what I very graciously called its feet. Even so, there was a thick puddle of inert slime left behind, and The Mimic's bulging eyes and echoing screeches told the story of the harm dealt to the monster.

Either that, or The Mimic's true form was a screaming blob of rage and violence, and I was misinterpreting its reaction. Hard to tell.

"Haven't done this in a while," said Xim as Varrin went on the warpath, and a column of ruby light formed around her. Light red fur sprouted from her skin and an onyx horn split her forehead and grew to two feet in length. Her body swelled and her muscles bulged, the eldritch symbol on her bodysuit twisting in anticipation. By the time she'd fully transitioned to her Ascended form, Xim was nearly a foot taller than Varrin himself.

She let out a bestial roar, the veins in her neck pulsing. Then, she turned to me and Etja, gave us a little wave, and sprinted away at The Mimic. The reverberation of her battlecries were layered with the whispered promises of the damned.

Nuralie was... somewhere.

Etja spun, dancing her way in front of me, and looked up at me with a smile.

"Nullify?" she asked.

"If you please," I replied. Then, I raised my hand to the sky, and began to chant.

"I call upon death, with life as my mission!"

As I chanted, Etja danced, and as she danced, her soul-halo bloomed around her. The base layer of Etja's soul was deepest black, like Orexis' had been, but over time bright swirls of color had begun to appear. At first, it had been a hectic pattern of neon primaries. As she spent more time with the party and explored the world, it had begun to organize itself into a beautiful tapestry of braided knots. The colors flowed between one another, wrapping together into intricate patterns and snaking off to a new nexus of

intermingling hues. The threads were small, and the points of connection few, but new ones were constantly forming.

Each knot represented a moment of her life. An experience that helped to define who she was, and who she was becoming. It was a wonderful process to watch unfold, and one that progressed much slower with people who already had a firm sense of identity. People who, for example, weren't a golem with a confusing mass of ancient memories embedded in their brain and one single year of real life experience.

I'd only realized the meaning behind the patterns by spending so much time with Etja, and seeing her soul's development. Although, I had gotten hints about the stories a soul could tell from studying Lito's.

The platinum of her Delver levels parted, and the base layer of her soul stretched out to encompass me. It created a profoundly vulnerable feeling, to be wrapped in the soul of another, but my experience with the *Reveal* ability had helped me become more comfortable with this sort of contact.

This was Etja's inheritance from Orexis, although the abhorrent god of yearning had likely never intended it be used this way. It was a passive skill that had been called *Bound Construct*, and was partially how Orexis had been able to use Etja as his soul vessel for infiltrating *The Cage*. After defeating the half-god's specter, the System had reformed the skill.

Shared Vessel

Your spiritual essence was forged as a shell to contain the overwhelming might of a godly avatar's soul-fragment—an avatar against whom you rebelled. Divorcing this specter from your body has unbound you from his will, but the ability to contain another entity's spirit within you remains.

You may open your soul and embrace the spiritual essence of a nearby ally, allowing you to use your *Incarnation* passive to combine one of your active skills with their own. This also allows you to utilize your birth sign to apply the benefits of your *Mirtasian Cadence* to the combined active skill, granting all relevant bonuses to mana efficiency. Any skill utilized in this manner additionally gains the benefit of your *Finishing Move* passive, and will deal 200% bonus damage if it is the fourth spell cast in sequence.

Etja's dance established a rhythm for her spells, allowing her to cast each successive ability for less mana. As her movements took her to my left, she used *Siphon* on me to raise me off of the ground. This gave her the room she needed to move, while still remaining close enough for the ability to function, eliminated me as a line of sight obstruction, and since it was the first spell in her *Mirtasian Cadence*, the cost of my *Explosion!* channel dropped by one point per second.

Enemies also tended to ignore the dancing woman to focus on the guy hovering menacingly over the battlefield shouting things like:

"I invoke destruction, such that no tranquil land might fall!"

While Etja and I did our thing, Varrin raged against the Mimic. The big guy had opted for a Strength and Speed based build, and when he connected full force with his greatsword, it made the consequences of my *Void Hammer* look tidy.

The Mimic grew limbs as fast as Varrin could shred them, the razor's edge of his blade traveling with so much force and speed that anything he hit was reduced to a thirty-foot spray of quivering slime. The mimic tried to box him in by curving its body, morphing around him on three sides, and thrusting with countless spear-tipped limbs.

Varrin dodged and maneuvered, kicking off the limbs to travel up The Mimic's center mass and shearing more appendages as he went. He didn't avoid everything, however, and I felt a wound open in my gut as I watched him take a spear in the abdomen. It slowed neither of us down, and Varrin kept hacking away at the beast while I continued to chant ominous phrases such as:

"You, who are violent, shall hear my words, and you shall know them in your soul!"

Xim tried to flank The Mimic while Varrin held its attention, but the tactic was useless against the creature. It already had literal eyes in its back, and grew a second massive face to bite at Xim, all while swinging a twelve-foot sword of bone and weeping faces at her.

Xim's claws were bathed in unholy flame, and she fought with wrathful brutality, indifferent to the wounds being inflicted on her by the innumerable smaller limbs that stabbed and swiped. She scooped out chunks of The Mimic with fiery talons and single-minded fervor like an infernal hound after a foxhole.

The Mimic brought its blade around, and Xim's footing was slick with the inert goo at her feet. She took the blade in the side, but rolled her body to try and reduce the force of the impact. Blood sprayed out from her ribs, and the blow sent her to the ground, sliding across the floor. The mimic's body elongated, its arms and weapons reaching out to where Xim lay, while still exchanging blows with Varrin on its opposite side.

Xim finally got to cast *Heal*.

Golden light pulsed down the Cleric's body, and the wound on her ribs began to close. I knew that one cast wouldn't be enough to fully recover from that type of strike, and her body was awash with smaller cuts and punctures, but Xim could take care of herself. She and Varrin were focused on tying The Mimic up while doing as much damage as possible, and something minor like seeing an ally getting cleaved in the chest by a car-length claymore made of carrion and sadness wouldn't distract me from my own job, which was to announce to the world foreboding things like:

"The dead cannot make war, and so you shall know peace!"

Etja whirled and shot out a beam of pure mystical force, carving a line across the mimic's side. The cost of my channel went down by 1. She swept one leg in front of her in a wide arc and went into a forward cartwheel, then sucked the dislodged mimic goo towards us and consumed it into herself through her palms. The cost of my channel went down by 1.

Finishing Move will be applied to your next skill.

Etja raised her hands, and the power of her *Nullify* spell flowed through her soul, into mine, and out into the tips of my fingers. The cost of my channel went down by 1.

Etja pumped more and more into the spell, its magic-disrupting potency swelling in crescendo with the last few seconds of my near two-hundred mana charge.

“Witness! Take Heed!”

Varrin heard the signal words, and dumped every stack of Blessed he had accrued into a final attack, cleaving a massive, crimson line down the center of the Mimic, then both he and Xim got the fuck out.

“Explosion!”

I snapped my fingers, and The Mimic became one with the stone and the air.

My chest cavity thumped as the shockwave crashed through the air in my lungs, and my sinuses were rocked like someone had just dropped a king-sized mattress on my face. The sound of the explosion was brief, but it was God leaning over to clap in my ears.

The Mimic was reduced to a fine spray that assaulted my skin with a split second of hurricane-grade downpour. My eyes were protected by my specs, but my mouth...

Gods, it was in my *mouth!*

As I retched and spat, I saw that Etja was lying on the ground. I was still floating, so I used *Gracorvus* to lower myself to her. Her entire frontside was soaked in mimic, and her eyes popped open when I knelt to check on her.

“You ok?!” I shouted at her.

“What?!” she shouted back

“Are! You! Oh! Kay?!”

She wiped some goo from her eyes and squinted at me.

“... What?!”

We needed to figure out some hearing protection.

Varrin made his way over to us, and I started to ask how he was doing, but he waved a hand to stop me and just pointed at his ear. He sat down on the ground next to Etja. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, and I knew that he'd be riding the Night-Rush bus for another fourteen minutes. It was better to avoid interacting with Varrin while he was on the rage high, so I let him be.

Xim appeared, back in her normal form, and somehow more soaked in slime than any of the rest of us. She must not have gotten as much distance as Varrin, which made sense. Her Speed was half of his.

We surveyed the room in silence, observing the thin paste that was The Mimic.

"Weren't we gonna ask it some questions?!" Xim shouted. I nodded at her. "The fuck do we do that now?!" I shrugged.

I maybe didn't think the plan through as well as I should have. My first priority was to *win*. A fireside chat afterward was a distant enough second that it wasn't even in the same county.

I began to struggle with the feeling of letdown, and a bit of guilt. I was frustrated that answers had been within our grasp, and my tactical use of a *yee-haw!*'s worth of supercharged magic TNT had taken it away. I could have played this one smarter. I could have played this whole *Delve* smarter, to be honest.

I took a breath and tried not to dwell on it. We'd do a deconstruction once we got back to Ravvenblaq, to talk about what worked and what didn't inside this mess of a Delve. For now, I needed to focus on claiming our level and getting us the hell out of here. Also, Nuralie was still missing.

I looked around for the sneaky alchemist, but she was nowhere in sight. What I *did* see was some mimic goo starting to wriggle.

"Fuck me" I said, and waved to get the attention of the others.

They looked up and saw me pointing out the puddle of goo that was now beginning to rise up into a vaguely humanoid shape. They stood, getting ready for round thirteen with this friggin' thing, when a different puddle began to rise. Then another. Then... another.

Suddenly, we were surrounded by a dozen or more mimics, their bodies dripping and viscous. They continued to coalesce, their forms becoming more distinct, but they were

struggling to stay cohesive. One flopped back and splattered into slime again, then trembled and tried to get back up.

Before we could move in and start working our way through this new horde, however, golden streaks of light filled the air.

Divinely charged arrows sprayed out from the dark, one for each mimic, and in less than a second, all of the struggling creatures were skewered through the head. They collapsed back into puddles, and moved no more.

Except for one.