

Nuralie stepped out of the shadows, her bow venting golden mana into the air. While the weapon was normally jet black, intricate rune work revealed itself when the loison put it through its paces, which she just had.

“You were charging *Hunger Shot* that entire time?” I asked.

Nuralie stopped several feet away from us, wrinkling her nose at our sludge-covered bodies. She, in contrast, was spotless.

“Yes,” said Nuralie. Pause. “You never gave me a position for the Big Bang strategy.”

“Sure I did.”

“Just shoot it’ is not a position.”

“It’s guidance,” I said, putting my hands on my hips. “And you executed it flawlessly.”

Kim looked over the inert puddles of slime.

“It’s weird that Nuralie’s attack targeted the mimics individually after the big one split up,” said the Cleric.

Kim was right. The skill was normally single-target.

Hunger Shot

Physical/Spiritual

Cost: 1 stamina/ second

Cooldown: None

Requirements: Agility 10, Fortitude 10, Archery 10

Take aim at a target and charge this skill for any length of time. Upon firing, you make one ranged weapon attack against the target for every five seconds this skill was charged. These attacks occur in rapid succession. All bonuses applied to this skill, your attack, your weapon, or your ammo, apply to each attack made this way, regardless of whether the bonus is restricted to a single attack or projectile.

“Skills are as skills do,” I said. “It must have still considered The Mimic a single entity, even though it’d divided. The System isn’t-”

“Not the time for your theories,” said Varrin, an edge to his voice. He bounced on the balls of his feet, staring at the only puddle of slime that still quivered.

Varrin’s words got me a bit miffed, but I let it slide since he was ‘roided up on Nuralie’s potion, and we made our way over to The ‘Last’ Mimic.

The Mimic was still partially shaped into her loson body, although her features were distorted halfway between her Architect form and her ‘blech’ form. From the waist down, she was nothing but slime. Organs spilled out onto the ground from her abdomen and chest cavity, dissolving into goo before us. Her skin was half-melted, exposing muscle and bone, and one eye slid down the side of her face, staring off into the distance.

The other eye had an arrow in it.

Varrin clomped across the wet and sticky floor, then dropped one of his armored, size sixteen feet on The Mimic’s chest hard enough to make a thud. Some more of her internals squished out from the pressure. He pivoted his greatsword off of his shoulder and swept it down until it was pressed into the side of her throat, the movement so quick that the tip of his blade dug a groove in the stone next to The Mimic.

The man could be terrifying.

I hid my apprehension over Varrin’s death knight vibes, and squatted down next to The Mimic, putting on a veil of calm distaste. I sighed.

“Nothing special?” I said. The edge of The Mimic’s mouth curled up into a grin, showing off several missing teeth. “I believe the deal was that, if we win, you talk. Are you even *able* to talk right now?”

The Mimic licked its lips with a greasy tongue, and struggled to take a rattling breath.

“The card,” she said, gurgling, “show it to me.”

I pushed my lips to the side and raised an eyebrow at the party. Their faces were hard masks aside from Etja, who looked on with the wonder of a five-year-old watching a building burn. No one objected. I opened my inventory and took out the *Get Out of Cage Free* card, then held it up next to my face, out of The Mimic’s reach. With her shapeshifting, she could probably extend her arms to try and snatch it, but that would result in a quick end for her.

“Let me inspect it,” rasped The Mimic.

“Why?”

“S-system... Insight,” she said.

“You think you’ll get more details from it than we’re able to?”

“I know that I can.” She sneered up at me, and a part of her cheek slid off. I rotated the card in my fingers for a few seconds, considering the request, and decided to take the risk of letting her touch it. This was the best lead we’d found after a year of ceaseless training and Delving. I needed a fucking vacation. Maybe this creature could give us enough information that I felt justified taking some time off.

I brought the card closer, and she reached up to brush it with skeletal fingertips. A gentle light flashed in her deformed pupil, and she let the hand drop.

“This is... worse than I thought,” she said.

“What’s worse?”

The drooping eye slid back up into position and peered at me, then rolled toward Etja.

“The avatars,” said The Mimic. “The Delve that issued this reward, The Cage... did not exist in my time. It is merely a balm for a symptom. There is... a cascading failure.”

“Care to elaborate on that?”

More of The Mimic’s face melted away, exposing the bone of her jawline.

“The System is deployed in phases,” she said. “Your civilization is in phase one. It challenges you, and separates out the weak. Once enough Delvers prevail over the obstacles placed before them... the next phase is unlocked.”

“What does that have to do with the godly avatars?”

“Very little, and at the same time, a great deal.”

I waited, but she volunteered nothing further.

“What do you mean by *our* civilization?” I said. “This has happened before?”

“More times than you can know.”

“What happened to those *other* civilizations? The ones that came before.”

“If you progress... you will find out for yourself.”

I leaned closer, and spoke very clearly.

“This is a Q & A, not drama club. Lose the suspense.”

The Mimic’s eye ran over my blue and violet armor.

“I would have... never known,” she said with a smirk. Some red foam bubbled out of the corner of her mouth. “I could not explain it... in the time you have won from me.”

“Won from you?” I said. “Are you one of these ‘obstacles’ that Delves are supposed to overcome?”

“It could not be stated... more plainly.”

“But what’s the fucking point?” I asked, frustration creeping into my tone. The Mimic’s grin widened, and I doubted I’d get an answer.

Varrin pressed the edge of his blade a centimeter deeper into The Mimic’s neck.

“What does the second phase do?” he asked. The Mimic’s eye swam to him.

“Tools,” she said. “Resources. Power. It will provide you with these things, such that you may continue... to grow.”

Varrin’s jaw tightened, and his grip on the hilt of his blade shook.

“How do we unlock it?” he asked, half whispering. There was a glint in his eye that I didn’t like.

“You cannot,” she said, and I heard the squeak of metal as Varrin twisted his grip. The blade dug a little deeper into The Mimic. I reached up and put a hand on the big guy’s arm. His eyes shot to me, wild, but he relaxed a little.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Your level is too low... to access all of the System Cores required.”

“System Cores?” said Xim. Her practiced look of stern indifference dropped, and she got down on her knees next to The Mimic, face alight with curiosity. “What are those?”

I should have known the charade would only last so long.

“I will... allow you to find out... for yourself,” said The Mimic, and we got a System notification.

The Mimic: Architect, Level 10 has offered to share world map data with you. Would you like to accept? Y/N

I furrowed my brow and selected “Yes.”

The locations of the following Delves have been added to your map:

The Hierophant’s Valley: Special-grade, level 30 or higher

Saekongr’s Crevice: Special-grade, level 20 or less

Deijin’s Descent: Special-grade, level 10 or less

I read the message, discovering at that very moment that my HUD had a map function, then pulled up the locations. A map of Arzia appeared, mostly grayed out except for Hiward, and three glowing points spread out across the continent.

The first was in the middle of the absurdly named Less-Than-Habitable Forest to the east, and the second was in the middle of the ocean southwest of Hiward, between the shores of Timagrín and the island nation of Davah. The third...

The third was in Eschendur.

“We could probably do this third one!” said Xim “It’s level ten, and our effective level is-”

“Witless child,” said The Mimic. “The level requirements are not guidance. They are *restrictions*. Do not hang yourself with the chains around your neck.”

“Why give this to us if you don’t think we can use it?” I asked.

“Everything is impossible,” said The Mimic, “until it isn’t.”

More of the meat along her face melted away, and her eye became a watery slush that drained from its socket. Varrin's boot sank further into The Mimic's chest as it grew soft and formless.

"I have... enjoyed this," she whispered.

The Mimic was reduced to a viscous puddle, and we finally got the notification that had evaded us the entire Delve.

Your party has defeated The Mimic: Architect, Level 10!

Your party receives the following rewards:

- 1) 10 Emerald Chips**
- 2) 5 Greater Mimicry Essences**
- 3) The Staff of Archon's Maker**

Party leader has set chip and currency allocation to: Even Distribution.

You receive: 2 Emerald Chips

Party leader had set item allocation to: Master Looter

Party leader receives all other rewards.

"Easy come, easy go," I said, staring at where The Mimic had been. "Which is a saying that should also work in the inverse, so why the fuck didn't we get more out of her?"

"Defeated?" said Varrin, scanning the message. He dismissed his System window with a sharp wave and kicked at the inert slime on the ground. A trail of fluid slung off the tip of his sabaton. "*Defeated?!?*"

"Guess we didn't slay it," I said, watching him carefully. Varrin tossed his sword into his inventory, pulled off his helm, and threw it in behind. He stood still for a moment, hands flexing, then pulled out a towel and began wiping himself down.

“Let’s leave this place,” he grumbled, running the towel over his face and hair. It came back darkly stained, and he looked at me with a fury that I knew wasn’t meant for me. I raised my eyebrows at him, and his features softened. He dropped the towel and pulled out a fresh one, beginning to work on his gauntlets. “Please,” he said, and it almost sounded pleading.

I glanced up at the obelisk, which had already begun to hum with power, preparing to dump a massive wave of mana into our bodies.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s take our level and go.”

“What do we do with this information?” asked Xim. She’d gathered her mail and robes up from where they’d dropped before her transformation, and held them folded over one arm. She clutched a handful of her black, curly hair with her other hand, eyes shifting over the ground as she thought.

“Nothing,” I said, “for now. We can talk about what it all means once we’ve had a bath, some food, and twelve or more hours of sleep. Twelve hours of *uninterrupted* sleep, preferably.”

I’d been able to push through for forty hours without rest inside the Delve with a steadily rising debuff to my stamina regen as the only listed consequence. But something the character screen didn’t show was the massive brain fog I was starting to feel, and the downward pressure the lack of sleep was putting on my mood. I didn’t have the brain cells left to rub together over this intel, and if I didn’t find a bed soon I might do or say something I’d regret.

I also couldn’t keep using my Fortitude as an excuse to avoid a bedroll, but some part of me, the part that needed to be in control, hated leaving the watch up to someone else. My party members were more than competent, and I trusted them with my life, but that still didn’t help me catch any z’s while we were in mortal danger. It was a problem I had to overcome, or I worried I’d make a fatal mistake.

The obelisk issued our mana distribution, we assigned our stat points in line with the builds we’d worked out beforehand, and we exited through the portal that appeared afterward.

Fuckin’ mimics, man.

Fuckin’

Mimics.