

The world got dark and sharp real quick, and then it burned.

The mimic hadn't been the corpse in front of me, but the cobweb-ridden chandelier above me. That it could imitate something with as much fine detail as cobwebs was of no surprise, especially after the craftsmanship with which it replicated the quillwork on illuminated manuscripts.

The mimic didn't need to be down here in a forgotten Delve preying on ambitious Delvers, emergent mana monsters, or whatever wildlife found its way in. It could partake in any number of lucrative career paths out in society. Its range and functionality were incredible!

It could become the ultimate multi-tool for a smith or engineer, an undetectable spy, a model, a celebrity impersonator, or a high-end three-dimensional mirror. If it kept everything it had mimicked stored in its cellular memory, or however its body worked, it could be an entire library, morphing into any book on command! It could even become a migrating museum!

Alas, as I shouted these ideas into the slathering mouth that engulfed my head and shoulders, the mimic was unswayed. It grew a hundred new fangs, and the freshly formed ivories launched from every direction within the orifice to pierce my face and neck. My eyes were spared, but my latest pair of rose-colored shades cracked and chipped as the teeth pressed into them.

HP: 1121 -> 1078

Bleeding: 24 (40% reduction from *Body of Theseus!*)

The mimic may have been better served by using *fewer* teeth since my face was doing the 'walking on nails' trick. There wasn't enough penetration for any single fang to stab deep into something vital because the force was being spread too thinly between the canines. Although I was a pretty hard guy to chew, so I understood why it may have misjudged its approach.

My words having failed, I reached up and grabbed a part of the mimic's amorphous body above my head and cast *Oblivion Orb*.

Oblivion Orb had gotten some serious juice over the last year. My Intelligence now sat at a healthy score of twenty, and I'd also gotten some practice in with mana-shaping. I could reliably adjust the size of the orb on the fly, which resulted in a linear decrease to the spell's mana cost when adjusting down, and an exponential increase to the mana cost when adjusting up. The exponent by which the cost was multiplied had gone down quite a lot with practice, but it was still more efficient to cast the spell multiple times to achieve the same volume of annihilation, as opposed to shoving mana into the spell for a bigger one-off cast.

In this instance, I used the downward adjustment, since the default cast of the five-mana spell was now as big as a bowling ball. I was casting pretty close to my head, and while losing a bit of skull and brain wasn't as lethal a proposition as it had been during the Creation Delve, I didn't want to accidentally teleport part of my parietal lobe to the nether.

Oblivion Orb blinked a pomelo-sized chunk of the mimic out of existence with a satisfying *pop*, and then the mimic and I burst into flames.

I felt the heat of Xim's *Judgment* spell building before it hit. In three seconds it went from hot, to 'heatstroke warning' hot, to 'I just leaned against the stovetop after making a stirfry and forgot to turn the eye off' hot, to 'why am I standing on the space shuttle launch pad?' hot.

The wet sucking and crunching sounds of the mimic's mouth were drowned out by the roar of a blazing conflagration, and I was hammered by the delayed-onset agony of seared nerve endings. It burned. Gods above, did it burn and it burned deep. Too deep. More than flesh was scoured by the flames, my very soul becoming tinder for Xim's divine pyre. The fire reached into me and sought out my sins and transgressions. Molten hands groped within my spirit to claw out my most wicked deeds to place them upon the scales and measure my depravity.

The hands fumbled about, then hesitated. They poked a few more places but came up empty. I sensed... encouragement. Like the metaphysical equivalent of a thumbs up and a slap on the back. The hands withdrew, and the spiritual pain vanished.

The physical pain remained.

I was on the ground, rolling from side to side, head still covered by the mimic. I was on fire. The mimic was on fire. I'm pretty sure the floor around us was on fire.

HP: 1078 -> 993

Ignited: 10 damage per second

The upside was that the mimic was no longer trying to eat me. It was trying to get away from me. In the confusion of the moment I had wrapped my arms around the mimic, hugging it tightly to my face while I rolled. My panicked attempt to smother the fire did nothing, however, since magic napalm didn't need oxygen to persist. The mana of the spell and the sins of its victims were both self-oxidizing compounds.

With my health ticking away and no more good ideas, I fell back on casting *Oblivion Orb* on the monster, plane-shifting another tropical fruit's worth of its goo. The creature's body split around my arms and hands and I lost my grip on it. It slimed its way up off of me and I lost track of it through the flames.

I heard Varrin bark something out, the sounds of metal striking stone, and then a wave of blue mana washed over me, extinguishing the flames. I waved a bit of smoke away, then saw Etja spare me a glance to make sure her *Nullify* spell had done the job of putting me out. She turned back toward the ceiling, the fingertips of her lower pair of hands transitioning from blue to orange before she shot a disintegrating beam at the retreating mimic.

I looked up to see the thing crawling on the ceiling, still on fire. A chain ran from its rear to the chandelier's ceiling mount, as though it hadn't fully given up on impersonating a light fixture. Etja's spell carved a line through the roof and cleaved the mimic's body near the back, severing the links. The chain fell away and dangled from the roof, goo dripping from its end. The mimic lost its grip and fell to the ground, writhing in a fiery puddle like the T-1000 taking a liquid metal bath.

Two arrows wreathed in golden light connected with the monster, followed by the blade of Varrin's greatsword, which smoldered with gray mana. The force of the hulking man's swing cut the mimic in half and launched both sides to the far side of the room with enough force for it to splatter into formless sludge. One half was jettisoned into a corpse-hosting alcove, dry bones shattering from the impact, the other detonated against the wall.

The blackened slime was now a slick stain on the wall and an oozing puddle mingling with a defiled corpse.

HP: 953/1121

“Are you alright?” Etja asked, walking up to check on me. She knelt and looked me over. My exposed skin was red and blistering, but my health regen would take care of the injuries in twenty minutes. My armor was enchanted Madrin plate, so it was scorched and would need some TLC from Seinnador, but still functional. My violet feather boa and ocean blue leather vest were both immutable, so they were fine.

“I think I’m okay,” I said, and Etja helped me back to my feet. When I stood, ash and debris sifted down my legs and fell out between the armored plates of my greaves. “My undergarments are *not*.”

Varrin and Nuralie went to inspect the puddles. The loson had produced a jug of her highly flammable sticky juice and soon began pouring it out onto what was left of the slime. Varrin supervised as the sneaky alchemist reignited the mimic.

Our party tried not to assume that anything was dead until we got a System notification. We’d been a bit lax with that in this Delve but were being reminded of the value of our double-tap philosophy. I wouldn’t be satisfied until every ounce of the thing was ash.

“Is your hair immutable, too?” asked Xim. She crossed her arms and inspected my head and face. I reached up and ran a hand over my scalp, finding my hair where it should be, then along my jaw to find my beard unharmed as well.

I liked to exaggerate my sense of vanity to the others, mainly because it was disarming, but if the hair had been burned away it wouldn’t have been a big deal. It’d grow back. In fact, the growth’s durability had increased proportionally with the rest of me as my Fortitude went up. I thought it might be a problem the first time I got a haircut, but magic shenanigans made the hair as easy to snip as I wanted it to be when I wanted the hair to be snipped. The same didn’t go for the rest of me, so I wasn’t going to be getting any tattoos or elective surgery any time soon. Unless the tattoo artist was also a Delver.

I gave Xim a toothy smile.

“You know what they say. ‘When it’s raining divine hellfire outside put a mimic over your head’.”

Xim nodded sagely at my words.

“How was getting judged?” she asked.

“You mean when the blazing hands of a god reached into my soul to yank out my sins like a rotten tooth?”

“Haven’t heard it described that way, but yeah.”

I shrugged.

“It was kind of nice, I think.”

“Nice?” Xim asked, uncrossing her arms and placing her chin on a hand. Her curiosity had overcome her mock irritation with me. “Explain.”

“It was as though Sam’lia came by for a visit, looked over my deeds, and told me to keep up the good work.”

“Really? She wasn’t mad?”

“Nothing to be mad about, I reckon.”

“Hmm.” Xim’s eyes unfocused as she contemplated my feedback.

“What were you expecting?” I asked. She blinked but kept staring into space.

“I wasn’t expecting anything,” she said. “But I was interested in the results.”

“Happy to be the subject of your experiments whenever you need.” That got her to glance back up at me, although the look she gave me was somewhere between excited and concerned.

Maybe she was excited to experiment, but concerned over my poor sense of self-preservation. Maybe she was excited to experiment, but concerned about how excited she was to experiment. Maybe she was excited to experiment, but concerned over how to maximize the utility of the irresponsible level of control I just gave her over my bodily well-being. Before I could ask a follow-up question, Varrin returned to us, grumpy.

“Still no kill notification,” he said, hand tightening on the hilt of his sword. Despite being the coolest cucumber in our party’s vegetable drawer this Delve, I could see the cracks starting to form. “It’s no more than a smoking dark spot on the ground and wall, but the System doesn’t think we’ve slain it.”

I looked over to where Nuralie was managing the dying fire. There wasn’t anything to burn once the accelerant had been consumed, so it was already mostly out, despite only a minute or so passing. I looked up to the ceiling, where the chain that had been attached to the mimic still hung. It was noticeably shorter.

I walked to the center of the room and looked up at it. The end of the chain looked goopy, either from being stuck inside the mimic or...

I activated my shield *Gracovus*, the thick slabs flying off my armguard to form a honeycomb pattern in the air before me. I directed it to hover flat over the ground at my feet.

The targe had been reforged by Varrin's grandfather, Ealdric Ravvenblaq Junior, or as Varrin affectionately called him, 'Papa', after it took a beating inside *The Cage*. It now had a total of twenty slabs, nineteen to make up the honeycomb body of the shield, and one 'home' slab inside the armguard which could be used to quickly recall the others.

With the additions, it was no longer sized like a traditional targe, which was generally a little broader than my chest. Now it was a much wider 'round' shield. The decision to make it bigger was made with little concern for its utility as a shield. The extra width made it easier to stand on.

I stepped onto *Gracovus* and willed it up into the air to inspect the chain twenty feet above me. The body of the chain looked exactly how I would expect. It was brass in color, with spots of corrosion from age and a thick coating of dust and cobwebs along it. At the bottom of the chain, it transitioned from metal, into mimic goo. I went all the way to the ceiling and found something else out of place.

The topmost link of the chain was three-quarters absorbed by the chandelier's ceiling mount, which itself looked like it was being pulled into the ceiling. I gripped the chain and cast *Oblivion Orb*.

The links were severed, and the chain below immediately morphed into wriggling slime as it fell to the ground. It snaked around the room, drawing curses from Varrin and a request that I become a better communicator from Xim. Then, the roof swallowed the chandelier mount, along with the rest of the chain. Once it was gone, the ceiling was flat and bare, looking every bit like that was exactly how it should be. There were even some little chips in the stone and other imperfections.

The rest of the party made quick work of the mimic-snake-chain. The Mimake. The Chaimic. The Snachic. The Snamain...

One might have said they'd killed the Mimchake once its wriggling body was a dark spot on the ground like the rest of the mimic we'd just fought, but I thought that Varrin had been right. None of the mimics that we'd fought had been killed. Not because they were all the same mimic that played dead and ran away, but because they were all *pieces* of the same mimic.

And it was a big fucking mimic.