

I pulled earplugs from my inventory—acquired after my last dance with deafness from the spell I was about to supercharge—handed a pair to Etja, then quickly shoved my own in. Hopefully, everyone else was far enough away to keep their hearing. I shoved my helm back on and began chanting.

“The Goliath and the ancient, in due time they all crumble!”

Etja’s flight seamlessly transitioned into the graceful rhythm of her Mirtasian cadence while her soul wrapped itself around me. Siphon, keeping us both aloft, immediately counted as the first spell in the cadence’s sequence and reduced the cost of my Explosion! channel by 10% through Shared Vessel’s benefits.

Molten rock continued to weigh down my shield and smoldered where it was splattered onto my armor, dealing a small tick of damage as the heat penetrated through to my skin and muscle. A quick pulse of Nullify from Etja caused the still-burning material to cool and degrade into chunks of ash. As it blew away into the storm winds, my channel became 20% cheaper.

HP: 748 -> 740

Varrin had made some impressive headway with his work above. Rivers of blood poured from a dozen of the remnant’s limbs, the vital fluid scattered by the gale as it descended. The biting rain was interspersed with large droplets of a deep burgundy hue. Etja used Siphon combined with Incorporate to pull some of the blood to her and absorb it. Her eyes lit up with the knowledge she gained. My Explosion! channel became 30% cheaper.

Finally, Etja began to channel Magic Blast into Explosion! with her Incarnation passive. My Explosion! channel gained another 10% reduction as mystic force saturated my spell. I felt Etja shape her blast into a sphere and begin pouring the rest of her mana into it to increase its size. The spell was already charged well beyond what we’d managed during our fight with The Mimic, and I sensed the mass of potent mana growing at an incredible rate.

“Time’s inevitable decay may be slow, but it is inexorable!”

The base diameter of Explosion! was 54 feet, which was determined by my Intelligence. For every second I channeled, that radius increased by another 5.4 feet. My resource expenditure through the boss fights hadn’t been very high compared to my typical high-octane slug fests. My mana regen had also been massively buffed by one of Nuralie’s mana potions and my Ambient Absorption ability, which really loved this leveling gauntlet. I expected the entire thing was taking place within some sort of walled-off, extradimensional space. Altogether, when I fell into this fight my mana was nearly fully regenerated, even after spending half of my normal regen on maintaining Shog’s summoning and Etja’s Life Ward. I’d also done little more than get wrecked in the fight, so my tank was full when I’d started channeling.

After my recent points allocated to Wisdom, my mana pool was at a healthy 412. Explosion! cost 10 mana per second to channel, which meant that I *could* channel it for 41 seconds from full. I valued my life, however, and wasn’t about to drain my entire mana pool while the big bad was still relatively unmangled. I decided to hold back 100 mana for Shortcuts, Void Hammers, and flying around on Gracovus. Since I’d already spent a *little* mana flying on my shield during the fight, that gave me a full 30-second charge to my big boom spell.

That would put Explosion!’s diameter at 216 feet—the space in which it would deal its full damage. The deafening shockwave and after-effects had a much larger area than even that. Now, 216 feet is decent. That’s more than half a football field in length. But the eye in front of me was at least 500 feet across. I wanted it to be a *lot* bigger. That’s where Etja came in.

“The destruction of the Parthenon! The annihilation of Flood Rock! Man often aids the present as it eats the past!”

First, my channel became cheaper from Etja’s Mirtasian cadence. My 30-second charge became a 38-second charge, taking the diameter from 216 feet to 259 feet. Not bad. Still too small.

Second, Etja combined my spell with Mystic Blast, pumping in more mana to shape the blast into as large of an area as possible. Etja had abilities that improved the efficiency of spending extra mana, the efficiency of mana shaping, and the efficiency of creating AoEs. They all stacked.

But that's not all, folks. The biggest bonus from being wrapped in Etja's soul hug was getting to take advantage of her Finishing Move ability. When she cast 4 different spells in a row, the fourth spell in the sequence became 200% more effective, and *any additional mana used to cast the spell became 200% more efficient.*

The "additional mana" text was primarily geared toward mana shaping and other bonus effects one could add to a spell from external abilities. My Explosion! spell did not get the increased efficiency bonus since I was casting it naturally, using its channel for all my mana without shaping or weaving in other abilities. It *did* get the benefit of the first half-increased effect—which tripled its size and took it from 259 feet to 777.

However, Etja mana shaped the shit out of Mystic Blast. The base spell got a boost in potency from the first half of her Finishing Move passive and all of the extra mana she gave it for increasing size became 3 times more efficient. That meant she could dump 3 times as much mana in, adding 3 times more AoE to the attack than she could normally contribute. Her mana spend was much smaller than mine on a point-by-point basis, but she still increased the size of the attack—even after its diameter had tripled—by another 60%. All of that together took the spell from a diameter of 777 feet to 1243 feet.

For reference, the Eiffel Tower stood 1060 feet tall. The Empire State Building rose 1250 feet at its architectural peak. I was about to unleash a spell with a spherical volume of over 37 *million* cubic yards.

"For those who evoke my ire, the unavoidable doom of time is too slow! I'm happy to speed that shit up!"

We were way too close.

My current max range on Explosion! was 230 feet. We needed to be at least 622 feet from the epicenter to avoid getting turned into giblets, a fact I realized uncomfortably late into the channel after realizing how out of control the spell's size was becoming.

"Pull us further back!" I thought to Etja. *"I'm going to have to dump more mana to shape the spell for extra range!"*

I was reluctant to give up my safety net of extra mana, but keeping our limbs on our bodies and our internal organs in non-liquid form seemed like a good use of the resource.

“I can add a little too!” Etja thought. *“But I’m gonna be spent after this!”*

“Hold back enough to fly out of this thing’s reach once my spell detonates! Pretty sure this will break the Mesmerize!”

Etja gave me a mental confirmation and we pulled back from The Pit as the pair of us shaped the spell until I could deploy it at a minimum safe distance. My mana pool dipped to 70 while Etja’s sank below 10%.

“Look on, so you may testify!”

I couldn’t position the spell *inside* the creature’s flesh. However, the poison I’d dropped had eaten a small crater into its eye, so that’s what I targeted. I swallowed, set my jaw, and snapped my fingers.

“Explosion!”

The eye became a cloud, divorced into particles by a concussive armageddon of mystical, physical, and dimensional damage.

The earplugs weren’t enough.

The pressure wave plowed into my chest, kicking the air from my lungs and forcing my heart to skip a beat. My teeth clicked together painfully and my sinuses screamed, sharp pressure popping at the back of my eyeballs. The crackling *boom* of the spell was as loud as it had ever been, though it was only the *second* loudest thing I’d heard that day—first place going to Clockwork’s screech.

A wave of eye goop assaulted us with enough force to bite at my skin where it passed through the slits in my helm and I was once more covered in monster viscera. I took solace in the fact that this was the longest I’d ever gone while inside a Delve before becoming drenched in the innards of a misshapen monstrosity. I’d kept my eyes tightly

shut after the spell activated, so I'd avoided becoming blinded by the high-velocity vitreous humor. When I opened them I found the air filled with the misty remnants of The Pit's sensory organ being swept into fleshy spirals by the tearing wind. It was beautiful in a macabre sort of way.

Rivers of blood and other fluids poured down The Pit's face from the wound, which encompassed more than just its eye. The entire socket was mangled out to where its cheekbones or hairline might have been, had it possessed such human anatomy.

Despite the earplugs, all I heard was the familiar ringing sound of damaged eardrums, but I didn't need to *hear* The Pit to understand its dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. I felt it.

The air throbbed with a nauseating pulse that shook my bones. Pressure rose in my ear canals as an infrasonic howl propagated from the remnant's mouth and throat, sending ripples through the rain. Its head turned, faster than anything of that size had a right to. The wind grew in intensity, bucking me with the aftermath of such a massive object moving so quickly through space. The mountain's face spun all the way around until its remaining eye saw me. It locked onto me and the pupil at its center constricted.

Etja had already flown away and I moved to stand atop Gracovus, hovering under my own power. There was a brief standoff moment where the remnant considered the speck of a man that had so harmed it. Then, the subaural pulse throbbed with greater fury and The Pit turned its full ire onto me.

All of The Pit's limbs abandoned their assault on my allies and hurled through the sky toward me like meteors. Its head spun again, aiming its mouth at me from which waves of heat poured, distorting the air with shimmering waves. The rain burst into mist as an orange glow bubbled up from its gullet.

I had certainly gotten its attention.

I also hadn't thought this far ahead.

I flew away from the remnant as fast as Gracovus could carry me, casting Shortcut every second and quickly making my way out over the ocean. I swung past falling limbs that hit the sea with enough force to create tsunamis that raced toward The Pit's organic shores. Pustules exploded as they hurtled by, showering me with fire and fragments, but the terror of a hundred-limbed mountain trying to kill me was banished by a burst of excitement as I saw the state the tendrils were in.

Blood flowed freely from many of them, scored by a thousand cuts. Some were cut down to nubs less than half of their original length. Others were tinged with the colors of

rot, covered in veins of black that crawled across their surfaces and grew in real time. Yet more were ablaze with crimson flame, the divine fire inextinguishable by the wind or rain. More than a few suffered from a combination of the status effects, some from all three at once.

I felt an intense heat erupt at my back, but I didn't dare slow down to check on the incoming breath weapon. I kept steadily sailing forward, the height and the relative speeds of the towering tendrils lashing out at me making my 55-mile-per-hour flight feel like I was standing still.

HP: 740 -> 704

The Pit's molten breath had a limited range and my initial safe distance plus my frantic flight allowed me to escape the worst of it. A lake of fire briefly enshrouded me, but my resistances allowed me to emerge from it mostly unscathed. However, I exited into a half dozen tendrils descending onto me, leaving no space to dodge.

I hastily cast Shortcut, taking me 300 feet northward to avoid all of the descending tendrils. There was a light crack of thunder as I appeared, the movement far enough to send the reforged skill into a 5-second cooldown but not enough to cause me any damage. By the time I got my bearings, a new group of The Pit's limbs were already crashing down toward me. It was too soon to use Shortcut again.

"Fuck."

I deactivated Gracovus's flight, sending myself into a ballistic arc over the sea. I flipped forward, grabbing the shield and bringing it around between myself and the tendrils. I braced the back of it with my knees and took a deep breath.

The limbs, united in their hatred, spiked me into the ocean like a team of hundred-story volleyball players jacked up on an Olympic swimming pool's worth of anabolic steroids.

The world went white. My shins and left forearm were shattered. My left shoulder was dislocated and my right knee became gravel. My heart struggled to keep my brain supplied with oxygen as the hit drove me downward. Spots danced in my vision until I impacted the ocean fast enough to feel like I collided with a brick wall. The sea's briny water was ice-cold, immediately beginning to invade my muscles and joints, but shocking me back to awareness.

HP: 704 -> 475

It seemed that any time I encountered one of this world's oceans, I was to be thrust into its depths with half my body crushed. I'd even taken nearly the same amount of damage from the tendrils as I had from Yaretzi's cannonball. It was an odd thought to fixate on, but running the numbers jarred my brain out of the sudden fog that had come over it.

Unlike the fight with Yaretzi, I was granted no reprieve or time to plan while I sank into the frosty depths. The tendrils snaked into the ocean after me like horrible sea serpents. The water grew cloudy with blood and rotten flesh and water boiled from the persistent touch of divine fire.

I needed to *move*.

I clutched onto Gracovus with my working arm and jetted away through the water. The fluid dragged at my frame as I went, sending fierce, bright pain through my broken limbs. I easily fought back against the pull with my increased Strength, angling myself toward the surface while avoiding the remnant's seeking limbs.

They weren't nearly as accurate as they had been above, which I assumed was because The Pit could no longer see me beneath the dark waves. I managed to twist between two of the tendrils as they writhed past me, the knobby fingers at their ends grasping blindly.

I broke the surface, the wind nearly paralyzing me as it battered against my soaked frame and compounded the freezing cold. The Pit hadn't divided its attention in the brief time I was gone, still wholly fixated on my destruction. A storm of limbs flailed in the air in every direction and then, all began converging on me.

My allies, however, were being completely ignored.

Nuralie stood atop The Pit's cranium, driving arrow after arrow into its head. Each strike made the necrotic veins on its tendrils pulse with sickly mana, growing thick and varicose. Xim leaped across its body below, bashing her way through the sharp barbs on its surface. They rose up past her waist and thrust themselves at her when she came close, her fur already matted with blood. She didn't care. Her body glowed with divine healing. Crimson infernos had begun to rage in ten different places across its hills of meat.

Varrin and Shog rode the limbs as they thrashed, driving their blades through them without resistance. Varrin cleaved one through completely and the amount of blood that erupted from it would have made Quentin Tarantino proud.

Our plan was working, I just needed to keep The Pit busy a little while longer.

The burning, bleeding, and necrotizing limbs blotted out the sky. I focused on a point on the opposite side of the mountain, just barely visible, and cast Reckless Shortcut at its maximum range.

My skin was minced by thousands of micro tears when I arrived at my destination, having moved more than 2 miles. The peal of thunder I created when I appeared rivaled the booming roar of the sky above. I planted my feet atop Gracovus and spun to face The Pit. It turned and searched for me, but its massive eye wasn't just for show. It spotted me in an instant and the tendrils swung around to start approaching me once more.

"That's right, dummy," I said. "Look at me, look at me."

I activated the Atrocidile roar on Gracovus, joining the ghostly wail with a roar of my own, preparing myself for the second—and final—round.