

Etja caught Xim, Nuralie, and herself with Siphon shortly after the floor collapsed. Varrin's fabulous cloak billowed out with sparkling fury as he flew to meet them, while I stood upon Gracorvus and quickly closed the short distance. Shog and Grotto floated like usual, their inherent ability to fly without cost sending a flash of envy through me.

The storm had begun to pelt us with small, icy droplets, carried on the wind with enough force to rattle my armor. The Pit's limbs ascended toward us, but—massive as they were—we had a brief time to prepare.

“Big!” Xim shouted over the wind when I got close. She studied the mountainous creature with wide eyes, although a smile tugged at the edges of her mouth.

“Really big!” said Etja.

“*Too* big!” Nuralie added informatively.

“What is a Delve Remnant?” asked Varrin, his bass-baritone voice effortlessly overpowering the gale. I wondered whether Strength affected how loud the man could be.

*[A Delve corrupted by the energies within until it can no longer be controlled. Sometimes by an outside force, other times by the negligence or hubris of the Delve Core.]*

Like so many other instances, we didn't have the time to go over the implications of what my familiar had just told us.

“Grotto!” I shouted. “Link us all up!”

I felt a mental tingle as everyone in the party was connected through Grotto's psychic link. It consumed much of the Delve Core's focus, but the wind was obnoxious and the battlefield was orders of magnitude larger than any we'd dealt with. I expected the distances between our party members to grow and quickly become prohibitive of normal speech. As long as this thing didn't blast us into different dimensions like Kaleidoscope had, I expected the ability to be invaluable.

“Nuralie,” I thought to the group. “Weaknesses?”

Nuralie's eyes were already lit up with mana as she used her Target Analysis skill. It was a skill she'd picked up after the Mimic Delve, but we hadn't yet had the opportunity to really take advantage of it. Our fights with the Littans had been too sudden and there was a chance the affected entity knew it was being targeted, so it wasn't the best for her

stealth. The bosses within the Delve so far hadn't been worth spending a chunk of Nuralie's limited mana pool on.

**Target Analysis: You can focus for six seconds to examine another creature and determine various stats, such as their current and maximum HP, mana, or stamina, what kinds of damage they are most resistant or vulnerable to, or which status effects they are strongest or weakest against. The amount of information you gain is determined by your INT and is opposed by their CHA.**

*"Its resources come back as question marks," she thought. "Strong against Dimensional. Other defenses are low."*

*[It will be unable to resist your attempts to sting it like insects.]*

*"Negative attitude, but Grotto has a point," I thought to the group. "Normal attacks probably won't be worth much. Stacking damage over time is likely our best bet. Varrin and Shog, you both try to dismember the incoming limbs. If it has blood, bleed the shit out of it."*

The pair nodded their understanding and shot off in opposite directions. The gnarled and infected-looking tendrils were closing in fast.

*"Xim, I doubt stuns will work, but confirm that theory. Either way, focus on Ignite. We've seen an entire mountain burn before. Let's see it again."*

*"Last time we saw that was because of a super spell from a level 54 Hiwardian Matriarch," she thought back to me with a grin, "but I'm happy to oblige." An obsidian horn grew from her head and fur sprouted across her body as she was enveloped in crimson light. "Etja, let me fall."*

*"If you say so!" Etja thought back as she let go of Siphon's hold on the cleric. Xim hit the release weave on her outer armor. Her muscles bulged as she fell alongside the pieces of her chain mail, her features twisting into a bestial form.*

While we mapped out our battle plan, Varrin met with the first of the approaching tendrils. The end of the limb sprouted into three massive fingers with a dozen knuckles, swollen as though the Delve Remnant had a fierce case of rheumatoid arthritis. Along its side, the pustules glowed with heat, rain boiling off their surfaces on contact.

Kazandak reflected a flash of lightning as it grew to its maximum size, 20 feet in length. Varrin brought it across the tendril as it hurtled toward him, deftly dashing to one side as it blasted past. His blade carved through one of the fingers as the 'hand' grasped at him, sending it careening back toward The Pit. If the mountain noticed the wound, it gave no sign. The twisted 'arm' slowed as the mountain arrested its movement, then began to swing back around to connect with the warrior, casting a trail of wine-colored blood through the air.

Varrin shot lower and targeted its wrist. Even with Kazandak at maximum length, it wasn't enough to cleave through. He *only* slashed through half of the limb. The giant arm sagged where it had been cut, and the weight of the mammoth feeler did much of the rest of Varrin's work for him. Cutting through half of the tendril destroyed its structural integrity and the top section peeled back, the wound tearing further. Vital fluids exploded outward as the limb split. Unfortunately, there was a lot more arm left to go, and the monster's near-stump met Varrin's blade once more, the top of it dangling by a thread.

Meanwhile, Shog stood in the palm of a second tendril. The c'thon spun in a whirlwind, greatswords cutting into the fingers in a flurry. He zipped from side to side as the fingers slammed down, narrowly avoiding being crushed. His feathers were already slick with the remnant's blood, but a second tendril approached to harry my summon. The sky was growing thick with them.

*"Nuralie, this storm is making it pretty dark,"* I thought to the loson. *"Can you teleport with Shadow Walk?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Good. Feel like using its limbs as a mobile strike platform?"*

*"I suppose we will find out how much 40 Agility is worth,"* she replied.

*"Then your strategy is simple. Poison. All the poison."*

Nuralie nodded and took a page from Xim, grinning like a maniac. She blinked away into the storm.

The brief reprieve Varrin and Shog's assault had granted us ended.

A tendril whipped toward me and Etja and we each flew frantically to one side of it. Gracovus moved faster than ever with my fresh points in Intelligence, but the limb course-corrected and threatened to hit me like a 100-mile-per-hour skyscraper. Etja

reached out and caught me in a burst of Siphon, accelerating me out of harm's reach. A second tendril was fast approaching as the first slowed to swing back around.

*"What do I do?"* asked Etja as she tried to direct both of us away from the next limb. I surrendered control to her so my flight with Gracovus didn't compete with her gravity magic.

I considered the mage's abilities, but her whole build was based around burst damage and mana efficiency. She didn't have any DOTs, but she still had a few tricks that would come in handy.

*"Use Shared Vessel on me,"* I thought to her. *"We'll dive in close and channel the biggest combo Explosion! we can. The longer I channel, the bigger it gets. Dimensional is no good, so we can't combine the spell with Disintegrate, but you can mana-shape Magic Blast to make it bigger, right?"*

*"Right! It'll make Explosion! even bigger when they're combined!"* she thought. *"Maybe."*

*"Time to find out. Gracovus costs too much mana for me to fly around constantly. Will Siphon be too much of a drain for you to keep me with you?"*

*"It's really cheap if I only target one ally!"*

*"Then let's head down to that thing's face and see if Mesmerize has a size limit."*

*"Right!"* Etja adjusted her course downward.

I felt the mage's Shared Vessel ability wrapping me in her own soul. It would allow me to take advantage of her passives and spell-buffs, while also enabling her to combine one of her spells with my own, giving Explosion! a healthy dose of Mystical force damage. My big-boom spell's normal damage was primarily Physical but it had a healthy dash of Dimensional as well. That would be exactly useless, according to Nuralie. Still, it was the best thing that I had for the situation.

The last time Etja had used the 'soul hug' was during our fight with the Mimic.

**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, sharing the cost-reducing benefits of your Mirtasian Cadence and allowing you to use your Incarnation passive to combine one of your active skills with their own. Additionally, any skill utilized in this manner gains the benefit of your Finishing Move passive and will deal 200% bonus damage if it is the fourth spell cast in sequence.**

**Mirtasian Cadence. You may establish a dance and rhythm prior to casting a spell. If you do so, you gain a 10% mana cost reduction to the first spell you cast, and an additional stacking 10% mana cost reduction to each spell cast in sequence with the previous spell, so long as you maintain your cadence. This cost reduction caps at 40%, and the bonus resets once the fourth spell has been cast in the sequence.**

**Incarnation: You are the incarnation of a Divine aspect. Your active abilities have been predetermined, but as a descendant of divinity, you can combine two active skills together to achieve a combination skill incorporating aspects of both skills.**

**Finishing Move: If you cast three different spells in a row, the next different spell you cast is 200% more effective, and any additional mana used to cast it is 200% more efficient.**

My stomach lurched as Etja accelerated the force of gravity pulling us downward. A tendril whipped past and wind tore across my entire body as it went. I also discovered what the simmering pustules did.

They exploded.

A gout of flame burst from the mass along the limb and rocky shrapnel filled the air. Etja kept me close as we flew and I had Gracovus at the ready. I brought it up between us and the tendril, barely responding in time, even with my Rapid Blocks evolution letting me move my shield three times faster than normal.

I was pelted by hard, sharp fragments as we were enveloped in fire. The shrapnel bounced off my shield and armor, absorbing most of the attack while Etja hid behind my

larger frame. The fire found its way into the cracks of my plate, searing my skin and enveloping both of us. My Life Warden skill was still active on Etja, however, and it shunted half the damage she took back to me.

**HP: 1220 -> 1202**

My recent advancements in Heavy Armor and Smithing showed their worth as the majority of the damage was completely mitigated. Some of it came from the ward on Etja, but the spell reduced that damage by an amount equal to my Physical Magic skill. Etja certainly took more damage than I did, even after being protected from the shrapnel and having half the elemental damage passed on. Her defenses weren't as robust as mine, but the mage had over 400 health, natural armor, and her mana shield to fall back on if things got dicey. She wasn't a typical, fragile nuker. More of a tempered and bulletproofed glass cannon.

While we raced toward the mountain's face, Xim was hit by a tendril. I cringed when I saw it connect, hearing the *thunk* of the tendril's thousand-ton body slam against her flesh over the wind and rain. A pustule exploded on contact as well, burning away fur and piercing the cleric's skin.

Xim had stowed her shield but kept her scepter in one hand. Her clawed feet and freehand dug into the monstrous limb, each wreathed in divine fire. She would normally rely on her natural claws when fighting in her ascended form, but the scepter she received from Khigra and the tribe gave her a chance to ignite based on her skill with Divine Magic. Her skill with Divine Magic was much higher than it had any right to be at her level, and it only took two blows before blood-red fire bloomed on the limb.

Each strike from Xim was also accompanied by a spell, her ability to wallop and cast simultaneously buffed by a Speed evolution. The first spell was Heal, and a golden light bathed her form, closing up wounds and smoothing over burns. The second was Judgment, which struck the limb farther down, creating a second wave of ruby fire which rapidly began to expand. With the tendril properly burning, Xim leaped away at another swinging limb, tanking another slam to the face—and every other part of her—and then healing herself again as she continued to light the fucker up.

She was unstoppable, but only for the moment. Her mana wouldn't allow her to keep up the combo for long, and the buffs to Strength and Speed from her beast form only lasted two minutes.

Nuralie appeared on top of a different tendril, her body translucent from the darkness continuing to gather from the ever-worsening storm. She rapidly fired arrow after arrow into the limb until The Pit got wise and brought another arm to bear, trying to crush the loson. Nuralie disappeared an instant before it connected.

The mighty limbs clapped together, sending a wave of force that scattered the rain in a perfect sphere. When the tendrils separated, a cloud of poisonous gas expanded from Nuralie's previous location—a little gift she'd left behind to sink in through the remnant's skin.

Varrin and Shog continued to slice through more of the mountain's arms, which filled the sky with their massive forms. The pair flew circles around them, though Varrin's speed outstripped my summon's, and Shog was sent sailing by a crushing strike and exploding pustules. The c'thon was wounded and smoking, but he looked pissed off more than anything.

From the limbs that Varrin bisected, blood poured out like small waterfalls.

*"Are you gonna channel while we fly?"* Etja thought to me as she swung us around another tendril, which exploded in our faces.

**HP: 1202 -> 1184**

*"I have to release the spell if I run out of mana! Too risky to start before it's in range."*

*"Okay. Then what'll you do until we get there?"*

I looked down at The Pit's massive, disgusting face below. It was a big target, and it wasn't like it could move out of our way. An idea came to me, and I smiled despite myself. Our party was quickly becoming a bunch of grinning lunatics.

*"I'm gonna drop shit on it."*