

I'd never gone skydiving. I thought that I wouldn't like it.

I was correct in that assumption.

The inner cage was a sphere with a diameter of about two and a half miles. We'd entered at the midway point and climbed our way up an absurd distance, though we were still far from the top. That meant there was well over a mile between us and the bottom. Or, if my recollection of terminal velocity was correct, and assuming it held true inside this Delve, we had about thirty seconds until splat.

I'd seen Lito fall from the sky and land on a boat without much injury, though I didn't know if he'd dropped from high enough to reach the maximum velocity a Delver could achieve when caught in gravity's clutches. Also, I was betting that the wood of a riverboat deck had a lot more give to it than the stone or mystery metal that made up the inside of this Delve. Given the strength of its prisoners, I assumed the building materials were pretty tough.

Getting thrown around by monsters hurt. I doubted they threw me faster than one hundred miles per hour, but no one was standing around with a sports radar gun to provide snarky commentary on Orexis' pitching speed.

Point is, I was betting my Fortitude wouldn't be enough to prevent this much fall damage. I *might* live, but I was still regenerating health from our last fight, and another ding before the confrontation that Fortune was leading us toward would be... undesirable.

I was also confused about something: Gravity. If the Delve existed in its personal little dimension, then there was no planetary mass to generate gravity. Where did it come from? It felt about Earth equivalent, but why? For the first few seconds of the fall, this was all I could think about. I was trying to logic my way out of the problem. By convincing the universe that the gravity here was nonsense, I could push my glasses so far up my nose that I'd stop falling altogether.

Once I realized that the universe was not interested in a debate concerning this matter, I began approaching the problem more pragmatically. This was made difficult not only because of the involuntary freefall but also because I was distracted by the spectacle I was seeing as we plummeted.

The interior of the sphere was ringed with multiple wide platforms. Here and there a portal could be seen, which I presumed led to other prisoners like Fortune and Anesis. While we'd made our climb, the platforms had been a battleground of a dozen breeds of

divine monstrosity, waging a multi-faction holy war inside the Delve. It was brutal, chaotic, and at times disturbingly erotic.

But as we fell, *all* of the divine spawn were dying.

For some, fights became instant trades of deadly blows, killing every combatant involved. Other creatures slumped over for no visible reason, or screamed and wailed, blood gushing from their orifices before collapsing. The pillars of light shattered into sparkling fragments that rained down on the corpses around them. One group of creatures exploded, taking everything nearby with them. Many of the ones closest to the edge of the platforms simply lost their footing, joining us in our descent.

I looked below, to the distant form of Fortune as he fell ahead of us, and watched the event begin to unfold on every platform he passed. It was *then* that I truly began to fear the avatar.

Turning away from the mass execution, I could still see my party members. We were in a tight group, and even Shog and Grotto were falling just behind us. That added to my confusion since they could both fly from what I knew. Either they needed some type of ground nearby, or Fortune's magic had them in its clutches.

Maybe that meant that the avatar would ensure our safe landing. Maybe that meant that any solution I came up with wouldn't work, subject to the same countering force as the c'thon and the Delve Core. Still, I saw the ground coming this time, so I was going to plan a way to keep my face off of it. I also needed to make sure my allies all had a solution.

"Etja!" I shouted over the raging wind blasting past us. "Can you gravity magic this shit away?"

"I- I think so!" she shouted back.

"How many people can you get?"

She hesitated.

"Three?" she said, uncertain. "I need more mana!"

Nuralie, Xim, and Varrin didn't have any tricks for falling from what I knew. Nuralie had the lowest Fortitude and was the lightest of the three, behind Xim in her mail and armored robes. Etja's ability seemed to work off weight, since she could lift scores of Praying Heads, but struggled with one mega-starfish.

“Get Nuralie and Xim!” I shouted. “I’ll get Varrin!”

Before waiting to see if she understood, I held my left arm over my chest and activated *Gracovus*. The item went into shield formation, and I felt pressure against my body as it caught the air. It wasn’t a lot wider than my torso, but the shape was less aerodynamic for sure. My allies dropped away from me slowly as my atmospheric drag increased, and I began testing a theory.

Was *Gracovus*’ velocity when I willed it to move relative to my body, or some other fixed point? Was the listed speed a simplified expression of force, or some kind of magical constant?

I held the shield out from my chest a bit, muscling it to keep it stable. The slabs were marred and pitted by the Bloom’s acid, but it still functioned. I began by commanding the shield to move away from me at full speed. That way, if its maximum speed was relative to a fixed point that wasn’t me, it would only feel like crashing into the shield at a hundred miles per hour, rather than the full terminal velocity I’d reached.

The shield began to zip away from me, which I rejoiced over. I then willed the shield over to Varrin.

“Grab it!” I shouted.

Varrin didn’t ask questions, he just hugged the targe when it got close. Then, I brought *Gracovus* back to me, Varrin on top of it. I brought the big guy underneath me, then hugged him from behind, having to search a bit to get a good hold.

“Sorry if this is a little awkward!” I said, trying to speak just loud enough for him to hear, and not shout his ear off.

I focused on telling *Gracovus* to move back toward me at a gentle pace and felt us slow as the shield began pressing into Varrin, and in turn, into me.

If *Gracovus* was trying to move backward relative to my body’s position at a constant pace, then we should be decelerating at a value equal to *Gracovus*’ speed. Or maybe the shield did whatever the fuck it wanted with magical bullshit and my mental gymnastics were pointless. Still, I began to command the shield to move backward even faster, the g-forces on my body growing as our speed continued to reduce. It wasn’t too strong, so I ramped it up to max.

The speed of *Gracovus* was based on my Intelligence score, and it math’d out to around twenty-three miles per hour. That amount of deceleration would take us from

falling full speed to a standstill in around six seconds before it, presumably, began lifting us in the opposite direction while accelerating at the same rate.

Wait, could this fucker make me fly?

I dismissed the thought and watched the ground rising toward us. The whole process had taken longer than I wanted, and I wasn't sure if we would make the full stop. As I prepared for impact, I realized I'd forgotten about Grotto and Shog.

I scrambled to think to Grotto at full speed, which the Core thankfully did in return.

[Why falling?!]

[Being pulled. Pull strength dropping.]

[Good then?]

[Yes.]

With that settled, I only hoped that Shog was in the same situation, as Varrin and I found the bottom-most level of the inner cage at around thirty miles per hour.

It was unpleasant, but nowhere near as bad as the Orexis slap.

I rolled off of Varrin and looked around. I was taken by a brief moment of panic as I saw gore and splattered remains all around me, until I realized the bodies were the twisted remains of the creatures that fell from the platforms and not my allies.

Etja, Xim, and Nuralie all floated down and landed gracefully on their feet beside us. It would have looked angelic, save for their ashen faces and wind-blasted hair. Grotto and Shog joined just after them, their feathers in even wilder shape. Shog immediately began grooming his plumage with the energy of a cat.

"You all OK?" I asked.

"Feeling better than you look," said Xim, already beginning to recover her normal cheery cadence. "You're laying in some entrails, by the way."

I looked down to see the mangled corpses of several fly-fishes around and beneath me. I felt something slimy under my palm and lifted my hand off the ground. It was covered in fish guts. It smelled as bad as you'd think it smelled.

"Gross," I said, then turned to Varrin. "You got another towel I could borrow?"

The pale warrior sat up, then threw me a dirty look.

“What?” I asked. “I never thought that would be how we had our first cuddle, but it was life or death, ya’ know?”

“The shield can divide,” he said. “You could have made a smaller configuration of three slabs and sent *that* to me.”

“Hmm.” I started to stroke my beard, then stopped when I remembered what was on my hand. “That may not have worked as well.”

“You two are making this weird,” said Xim. “It doesn’t need to be weird.”

“He whispered in my ear!” said Varrin, throwing his arm in my direction. “He grabbed my- You know what, never mind.” He got to his feet, then pulled a pair of towels from his inventory and tossed one at my face.

“I didn’t whisper,” I said, trying to duck the throw, then taking the cloth from where it ended up on top of my hood. “I spoke at an appropriate volume for our proximity. It was too loud to whisper anyway. And I wasn’t *trying* to grab... whatever you’re accusing me of grabbing.” I began wiping off my hands, then stood and looked myself over to see if anything else needed cleaning.

Once again, I was covered in the consequences of my actions.

“Christ, when did I get caked over in blood?” I asked.

“When we fought the Praying Heads,” said Xim.

“Also,” said Nuralie, “when you were under the Hand thing.”

“Why aren’t *you* all filthy?” I asked. Xim had a few tasteful spatters on her robes, and Varrin’s gore was mostly limited to his greaves and sabatons.

“The way you fight is, uh,” Xim said, pausing to look up and tap a finger on her chin. “It’s messy.”

“I thought you just didn’t care,” said Nuralie. Pause. “About being gross.”

“I care! What, is there some secret stay-clean fighting style?”

“Blood makes your hands slick,” said Varrin, working the cloth between the joints of his gauntlets. “There’s value in avoiding it by moving well while striking. No one *tries* to bathe in their enemy’s blood.”

“Eh,” said Xim. “Some people do. Still, it’s better to stay out of the way of gouts of bodily fluids. It’s all about weaving your attacks the right way.”

“Varrin,” I said, “I watched you slice and dice six Praying Heads while they were *on top* of you. How? How did you ‘move well’ to not get blood all over you?”

Varrin tossed the soiled towel to the ground and began inspecting his blade.

“I also have a self-cleaning mana-weave on my armor,” he said.

“Aha!” I pointed a finger at him. “There’s no bloodless kung fu, it was magic all along!” I swung my finger to Xim. “What about you? Are your promises of sanitary martial arts lies as well?”

Xim’s eyes wandered as she pulled a small black gem from her inventory. It pulsed with mana, and the few blood spatters on her gear began to fade.

“Were... either of you ever going to tell me about laundry magic?” I asked.

Xim and Varrin exchanged a conspiratorial glance, and Varrin even cracked a small grin. He banished the expression so fast that I barely saw it.

Fortune’s booming voice interrupted us.

“Good to see such dynamic camaraderie!” said Fortune’s front.

“They’re bickering,” said Right.

“Playful teasing,” said Left.

“And it has taken exactly as long as it needed to,” said Front. “Follow me.”

“Fortune,” I said as the avatar tried to leave.

Fortune kept walking, but his head turned, showing me his left face. I had to do a quick jog to catch up with his large strides.

“What the fuck, man?” I said, pointing up at the sky.

Before Fortune could answer, Shog floated up beside me, leaning in close. His beard-tentacle-feathers tickled my face.

“***You would make a mighty c’thon, Arlo,***” Shog’tuatha said. He wasn’t whispering, so I had no idea why he felt he needed to get so close to deliver his non-sequitor.

“The hell does that mean, Shog?”

“The way you challenge this more powerful being borders on suicide, yet you still make your anger known. A true c’thon declares what is his and will die to keep it!”

His tentacles undulated as he grew excited, and I took a few steps away to reestablish my personal bubble.

“He brought me back from the dead, Shog,” I said. “You think he’ll kill me because I’m pissed he just pushed us all off a cliff? Even you, by the way!”

Shog tilted his head, reaching up to continue smoothing his still-messy feathers.

“I was not pushed,” he said.

“Pulled, then. However you want to say it. Point is, Fortune forced us off a mile and a half tall cliff and nearly killed us all!”

“Nor was I pulled. I saw all of you leap daringly from the cliff, despite your flightless non-c’thonic bodies, and followed you down. I wondered why you screamed and flailed, but I do not know human culture very well. Was that not intentional?”

I looked at Shog, dumbfounded. The c’thon had literally jumped off a ledge just because everyone else was doing it.

“I knew you’d survive!” said Left, smiling. “You even learned a thing or two on the way down!”

The exchange with Shog had thrown ice water over my anger at Fortune, so I decided not to reply. Instead, I turned and followed the avatar, wondering what the next cliff he pushed me from would look like.

Well, not really. I was pretty sure that it was going to be the extra-dimensional prison of an angry god.