

Deathless 81

Chapter 81 (I) Core

A lot of Pathbearers will tell you that trying to take a gate, a city, or even a town while the local Lord is still alive is probably the most miserable experience you can have in war. I beg to differ. I think the most miserable experience you can have is taking the gate, only to find that the locals still hate you.

A quick crash course for all you new Pathbearers out there: taking a gate or city or town or anything that comes with a mana core usually results in a complicated, messy process under the title of Synchronization.

What is Synchronization? Well, since a location's mana core typically doesn't start awakened and can't guide its own development, it usually needs to latch on to a Lord, one person, one Pathbearer to shape its growth and concentrate its mana. And mana cores often output a hell of a lot more power than any individual Pathbearer does. So you can imagine how miserable trying to take a location is when the local mana core is constantly smashing you with an earthquake, a tornado, and a tsunami of flesh-eating eels all at the same time.

Connected to the term Synchronization is the term Desynchronization. This frequently happens when everyone within the core stops thinking of the local Lord as actually being the Lord. The easy way to do this is simply by killing all the people aside from the Lord, or enough of them that morale completely collapses.

It sounds simple, but functionally, it's not that easy to do since, well, you have to push all the way into the core. That usually results in 10-to-1 attritional losses, favoring the defender.

The other easy way is to simply destroy the local Lord's good name, to make him seem weak or incompetent or unable to protect them. Understand this: people shape a location and its skills, and if at any point all the people collectively decide that their current Lord isn't up to the task, he or she will start

experiencing Desynchronization. As in, the mana binding them to the core will withdraw and the mana core will turn to an unattuned state. If left there, the mana core will then proceed to the next stage, mana decay, in which all the skills it has accrued and all facilities, environments, and other developments it achieved will collapse.

So back to the problem at hand: you've taken a place, and now you're trying to anoint a new Lord. But if there are any survivors left over, they might not consider the one you appoint to be the new Lord, so it doesn't work. So you have to get rid of all of them first and move in your people, except that usually completely cripples the city because there's not nearly enough people, not enough population, not enough history, not enough development, not enough changes. The core enters a state of decay as well. Remember if it has mana, it's shaped by legends, feats, achievements, and struggles just like a Pathbearer. And when you stop being able to surpass your previous struggles, well, you start decaying.

So, weirdly enough, the most dangerous time to be a Lord is right after you kill the previous one. Of course, this isn't a problem if you just intend to destroy the place and leave. After all, if your only intention is to deny a location to your enemy, things become a lot more simple.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

Adam drove his Wings of the Starhawk into the last raven's face. The spy screamed as intense heat seared into his eyes, and that was enough to distract him from the struggle—enough for Adam to form a final set of hydrokinetic hands and drive his curved stellarite saber through the man's throat.

As the raven gurgled, Adam took a step back, out of breath, and shot the dying bastard three more times with his Veilpiercers. And then he shot the raven's corpse again and spat on him for good measure. "Felling rat bastard thought he was going to sneak up on me," Adam muttered.

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Eight. They had eight snipers in the area, all firing at him with Ascendants knew what kind of weapon. Adam stared down at the not-ballista the agent had been using. It was long-barreled, but it also didn't seem to have any arrows anywhere. No bolts either. It had something of a large box connected to its underside that fell out during the fighting, and it ended up spilling small metallic fillings all over the ground. The overall mechanics remained a mystery to him, but what he could tell, however, was that it had a trigger, and its scope offered a variety of zooming options. It didn't exactly have a Farsight Enchantment like his Spellstring did, but it worked to a similar—albeit lesser—degree.

And for the umpteenth time, Adam wished that he had Shiv's Cloak. "Damn System-favorite Deathless bastard gets everything," he grumbled. From nearby, there came a whimper, and he noticed that the room the raven had set up as his firing perch still had people inside. People huddled against the wall, a well-dressed man wearing a waistcoat with what looked like two slaves by his side. Adam regarded them for a moment, and then he fired two shots.

All three cried out, but the slave collars shattered, as did the walls behind them. Dust blew through the air, and as it cleared, they stared at the Young Lord, all with their eyes wide, mouths open.

"You two," he said, pointing at the slaves. "Run! Find a safe place! You," he pointed at the man, "face down on the ground, and think about what you've done."

"Me?" the well-dressed man whimpered.

"Yes, you. You're a Pathbearer, no? Or Pathless?"

The man looked confused. "I'm a P-Pathbearer."

"Then what are you doing with slaves? Why are you debasing your own skills, disfiguring your own struggle?" Adam spat on the ground, and glared at the man with disgust. "I'm not going to kill you, but you sicken me. This entire place sickens me." And then he paused. "But that's fine. Because soon, it won't be my problem anymore. And you won't be Compact's people either."

"What?" the man muttered.

"Gate Lord Confriga is going to die soon," Adam sneered. "Tell everyone you know that. Spread the word through the building. Gate Theborn is under new management."

The Young Lord nocked an arrow. But on an impulse, he shaped two more hydrokinetic limbs and snatched the strange weapon the raven had been using. As he fired at the inverted obsidian tower some four kilometers away, a rift opened, granting him access to a dimensional gateway—one that he promptly flew across. All without ever blowing through the walls or windows of the building.

And there was a point of pride for Adam. Unlike Shiv, he didn't need to break everything to get the job done. He was neat, he was effective, and once more, he was about to complete a critical objective. But before that, his heart hardened. He needed to see if Valor was... well, alive might not be the right word for Valor.

Yet, as soon as Adam emerged from the other rift, he found himself surprised. There, he found Valor dragging the Graven Cage behind him with a corrosive leash. Valor had retrieved the Necromantic construct from Adam's dimensional pathway before the Young Lord even got back. More importantly, Valor wasn't dead. Relief washed through Adam, though he still examined the Legendary Pathbearer.

There was a deep smear along the back of Valor's skull, but it seemed to be residue leftover from the projectile more than anything.

"Valor!" Adam cried out. He flew towards his so-called mentor.

"I'm fine," Valor shouted. He sounded more annoyed than usual. Adam squinted, using his Seer of Horizons on Valor's wound. Just a smudge after all.

"I'm fine," he reiterated. "My body is made of harder materials than most in this world, and my Toughness is Adept right now. And it wasn't a direct hit. Now, focus. We still have a deed to finish."

As he touched down, the Young Lord realized something. Valor was embarrassed. He was embarrassed about getting shot in the back of the head. Adam laughed. He had ammunition to use against Valor now. "Well, I'm glad to see you're all right. It would be a very sorrowful thing if a powerful Pathbearer like yourself was brought low by an act of devious subterfuge, at the hands of Adepts—well, maybe Low Masters at best."

"Adam," Valor said. There was a low growl in the old Pathbearer's voice. "Don't."

"I'm just expressing my worry," Adam said, raising his hands innocently.

Valor positioned the cage right next to the elevator's adamantine shaft again.

"It would have been such a pity to tell everyone you died after plunging into the molten rivers," Adam moaned dramatically.

Valor looked at him from the corner of his eye. "Adam, you've been spending too much time with Shiv. You sound like him."

The Young Lord grimaced. Valor knew exactly what to say to make even mocking him unpalatable.

Despite the banter, Adam's paranoia was still burning hot. Immediately, he pulled out his rapier, and its edge flashed with gleaming light. As the brightness faded, a clone of Adam appeared, followed by another, followed by another, and soon a small contingent of Adams were holding the perimeter, watching, distracting, their armor serving as a bulwark against any potential snipers.

"Now, let's start," Adam said.

The spatial magic he layered over the shaft earlier had completely dissipated in the meantime. That meant he needed to start over. As he did, though, he constantly summoned new clones of himself to replace the ones that faded, and they helped him set up his Dimensionality spells faster. Valor hummed with approval, and Adam simply shrugged. "I should have thought about that earlier. I do that a lot with the rapier..."

Adam and his clones shaped a series of spells. A new bubble of shadow layered in distortions coated the upper section of the elevator shaft, and as it grew thick enough, Adam prepared a Veilpiercer. He judged the position of the Graven Cage and made a gesture using a hydrokinetic hand, pointing downward. "Valor, lower it slightly. We're going to have to intercept the Animancy Core when the platform shoots by."

"Correct," Valor said. "But we just need to get the cage nearby. It will snap over the core when it gets close enough."

Adam paused, and he did something that he was trying to practice more: he thought ahead. When the platform descended, it was likely going to be made of adamantium. As such, he could get below it and fire multiple Veilpiercers at the bottom of the falling elevator. If nothing else, it would slow the plunging elevator and keep the Animancy Core from immediately crossing over into Lord Scorn's world. It also wouldn't completely rely on his Reflexes.

Adam relayed his thoughts, and the Legendary Pathbearer simply nodded in approval. "Good, good. Likely unnecessary, considering the capabilities of the cage..." Valor regarded his creation. "But still, good. It is important to come up with as many redundancies as possible for your plans."

"Alright then," Adam said, letting out a breath. He still felt nervous and didn't stop summoning more clones of himself, but so far, no one had taken a shot at him. That didn't mean his paranoia went away, however. He knew there were still Aviary agents sulking about. The mana bombs had stopped going off. If he had to guess, his killing of the snipers made the others go to ground. They were hiding. They couldn't all be dead. Especially with how frequent the bombs were going off just a few moments ago.

He summoned a corrosive fissure using his vambrace, and then he dipped the tip of his Veilpiercer, infusing it with Necromantic energy. He drew in a long breath to still his beating heart, and then he waited. Waited for his hand to stabilize and his mind to focus. It was all going to be in the timing, even with everything he had planned.

The Young Lord fired.

A rift tore open right in front of him.

His dimensional arrow sailed, carving a corroded pathway across the planes of existence.

The shot finally splashed into the spatial distortions he had layered over the shaft, and they were immediately contaminated. A splash of green, corroding energy consumed the elevator. Adamantine was practically unbreakable for anyone without Heroic Physicality, but Necromancy was a different kind of power altogether. It dissolved the matter, ruining it, eating through the dense, powerful material, turning it into dust thereafter.

As soon as that happened, his Wings of the Starhawk flared brighter as he sped through the air. Valor was already flinging the Graven Cage forward using his lash. It sailed, tumbling toward the space where the elevator was certain to fall. Adam arrived immediately below the shaft, a mere five meters between him and the third gateway leading to the Vulteg home world. He saw the bottom of the elevator barreling towards him. Immediately he fired three Veilpiercers at once, followed by another, followed by another, multiple clones aiding him.

A series of impacts hammered the platform's underside. It slowed, no longer threatening to crush Adam and giving Valor just enough time to maneuver the Graven Cage into position.

They continued firing as the platform lowered and lowered, and finally, as it cleared the shroud of crackling corrosive energy that melted through the elevator shaft, Adam laid eyes on the Animancy Core for the first time. The underside of Gate Theborn lit up; it was like a bright, brilliant-blue star flaring over the molten rivers that crisscrossed the expanse below. It was so bright, Adam had a hard time focusing on it, but more than that, its radiance pierced his very soul, and it seemed to wash through him.

His skills began to jumble, notifications appeared before his eyes as some of his levels began to jump and then flicker. An unnatural dread washed through Adam, but there was also a sense of wonder, a sense that he was witnessing something at the crux of all Integrated reality.

But then the light faded as the cage smashed down over the core. The Graven Cage expanded, the skulls opening their jaws wide as they unfolded like the petals of some undying flower carved from groping limbs and pale bones. The crackling power of Necromancy immediately washed over the blinding brilliance of Animancy, and the cage closed around the Animancy Core as the platform kept falling. A clash resulted, with the core's blinding radiance warring against the eerie green of Necromancy. There were a few pulses of power, but finally, the corrosive, festering magic that lit the open sockets and mouths of the cage's skulls faded to a faint, bluish glow.

Each of the protruding limbs staking out from the Graven Cage ignited. A net formed—a net of complicated Necromantic sigils, spell patterns that circulated and jumped from the point of each extended limb. Adam wasn't sure what he was witnessing, but it was an incredibly complicated spell pattern. And judging from how both the cage and the Animancy Core seemed to stabilize, he guessed it was some kind of mana equalization mechanism.

The empty platform plunged through the third gate. Adam barely got out of the way in time. But in the air, the Animancy Core hovered, and Valor let out a breath.

"Well done, Hero Adam," Valor said.

Chapter 81 (II) Core

"Yes, you too," Adam breathed. He didn't realize how fast his heart was pumping. That was... There really wasn't that much room between the dimensional gateway and the bottom of the obsidian tower. Adam briefly eyed the shimmering surface of the gateway. Dimensional mana briefly parted to reveal a glimpse into what seemed to be a deep, boundless ocean, colored bright orange, the same molten hue that constituted all the rivers running through the bottom of Gate Theborn. And so Adam realized why the platform had to be made from adamantine. Because nothing else would survive in such an environment.

For a moment, the Young Lord remained tense. He expected something to happen now. Something terrible. A new attack. Sniper fire. He summoned more of his clones as the last one faded. But as they arrived, drawing Veilpiercers and looking on toward the horizon, they sensed nothing, and neither did he. They had the core. They had the core, and nothing bad happened at the final moment. He looked up at the sky and let out a sigh. "Thank you, System, you rat bastard. Thank you for giving me just one moment to breathe."

And then, as if to mock him, Adam heard a loud bang come from within the obsidian tower. As he looked up, he saw the faces—well, more like glowing orbs that constituted the heads of two dimensional golems that were staring out through the reinforced glass lining the bottom walls of the obsidian tower.

And both Valor and Adam shared a mutual breath of frustration.

"Adam," Valor began, exhausted. "It is important never to thank the System. It is a creature that desires strife above..."

"Yes, I know," Adam growled. "Valor, I'm going to shoot an arrow now. Get the Graven Cage through it. I'm going to try to distract these things and..."

And just then, one of the dimensional golems fired a Pyromancy beam at the Young Lord. A beam that he barely dodged.

He drew four Veilpiercers at once. Two of them smashed into the faces of the golems, not giving them a chance to press their offensive. He dipped those in corrosive energy too, but the other two arrows he fired created two pathways for the Graven Cage and Valor to escape across.

They were both manifested next to each other, the rifts practically touching. But in the chaos, Adam hoped to confuse the golems, even if they noticed the dimensional pathways.

Just then, a deafening siren began to wail as the mana core went from dull gray to a severe and miserable red. It began to shudder, and the air grew impossibly cold. Adam felt his Magical Resistance shudder as his armor sustained the impact on his behalf. The golems fired again, their beams of flame cleaving through the air. His clones were firing back now, and the golems were being buried alive under a series of Veilpiercers. If there was more distance between him and the golems, he suspected he could have blown them apart immediately, but right now, he was just focusing on delaying action.

"Adam," Valor cried out, "I'm going back to the anchor. We will store the cage there."

"Got it," Adam shouted.

And then the Young Lord paused as he remembered that he had added a spell pattern to the anchor and could teleport there directly with Valor. He fought the urge to slap himself. This wasn't acceptable. In the heat of battle, sometimes, Young Lord Adam Arrowjust forgot things when he got too caught up, too anxious.

"Never mind that!" Adam dodged another two shots. The golems were shooting out now, their bodies trembling with lightning as they chased him. The sound of booming thunder came thereafter, and the Young Lord grunted as shockwaves shook his armored form. Limbs of surging water coursing with crackling electricity reached out to grip him, but the Young Lord was already casting his next spell.

A shroud of shadow wrapped in spatial distortions swept over him, and before Valor or the cage could cross over either of the dimensional pathways he prepared, Adam shot by them and finished the spell. A moment later, the dimensional shroud gripping the Young Lord folded inward and drew them across space. They surged through the insides of Gate Theborn, going from the bottom of the city to a place even deeper: Guardshead Leu's special teleportation anchor.

And as they reappeared and landed on the tiled stone floor of Leu's chambers, Adam coughed and shook his head. He looked at the cage, trying to make sure it wasn't damaged. He let out another breath as it just hovered in the air, crackling Necromancy shrouding its form.

Beside him, Valor observed Adam. "Adam? Are you well?"

"Yes," Adam breathed, "I just, I was," he clenched his teeth a little bit. "I—the extraction... I remember thinking about just teleporting back, but I just responded and—"

"People do hasty things in the heat of combat," Valor said. "You are not stupid; you were just overwhelmed. Some more combat experience will be good for you."

"Some more combat experience, yes," Adam said. He nodded as he fought to keep his breath under control. His hands were bloody shaking. Again. He hated it when they did that after fighting. He sighed. "Bloody System-favored bastard, how does he do it?"

"You know you are System-favored now too, yes, Young Lord?" Valor asked.

Adam eyed the skull and its translucent apparition as he let out a shuddering breath. "Yes, but it's mostly his doing, isn't it? I'm just favored because he is."

"Perhaps at the start," Valor mused. "But if you continue surviving, then his flame is no longer his flame, for now you burn as well. You're going to have to face death over and over now, Hero. There is no avoiding it. Not with the path you have chosen."

Adam did his best not to swallow. "Well, I suppose I'll have a lot more planning to do."

"I suppose you will," Valor replied. "But remember this: You are not Shiv."

Adam gritted his teeth. "Yes, I know."

"This is not an insult or a condemnation. You are not Shiv, and he cannot be you. I see it in your face. I have made that expression before, when I envied someone so much it hurt. In many ways, I was more like you than him by far."

"You were?" Adam said, surprised at Valor's admission.

"I was. In fact, I don't think there are many like him at all. It is unnatural for someone to be that resilient. And it might be a detriment in certain situations."

"Detriment?" Adam repeated.

"Correct. He fights with nothing held back and gives himself entirely. And if he weren't who he is, wasn't as skilled, and didn't possess his predatory cunning, then his true death would have come extremely quickly. But still, he dies often. He dies without fear. He dies. You are not spared from death. You are not spared from trauma. But you are precise, thorough, and upright. And there you are again, different from me. I cared little for anyone when I was young. And you care for too many."

A distant explosion lit up the room through the large, oval window at the center of the hall, replacing the core's oppressive red light for a short moment. Adam stared at Valor, at the way his ghostly eyes bored into him.

"It is good to envy others. It gives you something to aspire to. But understand that what you did, eliminating the snipers without inflicting any damage, and only being noticed at the end, that is not possible for Shiv. There are times to be blunt, brutal, and unrelenting. And there are times to be careful, precise, and unfailing." Valor turned to regard his Graven Cage. "We are here right now because of all of you. And you did good."

Adam blinked as his heart finally began to slow. "I, uh, I was..." He trailed off. He just didn't know what to say, at least for a moment. "I... I... Thank you?"

"You have been under an immense amount of stress," Valor said. "I am simply telling you what I wish someone had told me centuries ago. I might not be able to remember most of my long life, but I can still remember what I felt. And I can tell you one thing for certain. Envy another for what they have, Adam, but never forget to be proud of yourself for who you are. And if you continue to strive, someone else will come to envy you at times as well. It is not a bad thing to be admired or to admire. When done properly, it brings us all closer, and it makes us all greater. The want to ascend is the only defense we have against the System and its endless desire for war and death. Aspire to stand tall, to be the one that courts the flames of glory—to be consumed by it and to emerge not burned, but rather reformed."

As Valor finished, something inside Adam hardened. "Emerge unburned," Adam said. "Right." He looked at the Animancy Core, or at least the cage that held it, and something inside him swelled with triumph.

He stole this. He stole this from Gate Lord Confriga, and the poor bastard didn't even know it. In the middle of a war, he managed to cut through an adamantine shaft with Necromancy, defeat multiple Aviary agents, and steal the Animancy Core. And now, because of him, they were going to finish another Quest. That's who he was, Adam Arrow, Quest finisher. "Keep the core here for now, I think," Adam said. "I'm going to go out again. The others will—"

"They will need you," Valor said. "And you will need them. Watch over them. You, more than anyone else, are the eyes and pathfinder of the group. So ensure the deed is done, and ensure your companions find the success they need to bring this Quest to an end. Remember you are all burning together, and you need not burn alone."

And just then, Adam noticed something about Valor. The Legendary Pathbearer sounded sad, sentimental.

"Valor," Adam said.

"Hm?"

"You deserved to hear those words from someone too. When you were young."

The Legendary Pathbearer went unnaturally still. Then he grunted. "Thank you, Adam. Now, go. And leave the weapon you took from the raven. I know what that is. Can Hu will be interested in examining it."

Adam blinked as he dropped the long-barreled thing. "What is it?"

"It's a Legacy Empire Model-Zero Gauss-Gyro Mixed Ordnance Platform. A gun, in simpler terms. It is an old weapon. Leave it. I will tell you about it later. You will likely come to like it."

The Young Lord eyed the long-barreled weapon and arched an eyebrow. "Alright. I'll be back later when we go for Confriga. I'll be back."

And there it was again.

That pinprick of pain, over and over again.

Something was striking its Magical Resistance.

Something was piercing deep.

Something, or a lot of somethings.

The attacks were coming at all angles, constantly.

So many little needles smashing against its very being.

Its Magical Resistance was beginning to crack ever so slowly.

It lashed out, screaming, striking its food.

It gazed upon them and pulled the prey inside.

So many different kinds of prey.

So many.

Vampires.

Humans.

Elves.

Umbrals.

Machines.

Vulteg.

More.

It came through the gap

when the Sword-Bearer offered the Eldest a small bit of his soul-blood. And so the Shoggoth was given unto the Sword Bearer as a weapon. A weapon that was meant to consume Pathbearers, to feed on and burn their skills until nothing was left.

And that it did. Everything it could reach, it consumed, it slaughtered. It turned their skills against them and fed and fed and fed...

But it couldn't find the hidden Psychomancer.

That one that kept hitting it, over and over.

But was it one or so many?

The strings, they were confusing.

Maybe it was many.

The Shoggoth hadn't seen Psychomancy like that before.

It spotted the strings, every now and then, jabbing out, stabbing it from one of its victims.

More and more of the strings struck at its mind. "Stop it!" the Shoggoth howled from its many maws.

Its voice shook the world.

It cast its stomachs out from its many eyes, consuming more prey. It used their Psychomancy to strike back, burning the skills, but it was not enough. The hidden one attacked in waves and receded far away in irregular patterns. And—they were back, stabbing from everywhere, constantly stabbing over and over from all angles.

"Where are you?" the Shoggoth cried. "Where?"

And above, it could see the displeasure and confusion written upon the Sword-Bearer's eye.

And then there was a notification. A warning.

[The Stranger] has taken notice of the situation.

But the Shoggoth was too distracted to pay attention to that. It just didn't understand. It ate so many Psychomancers. So why couldn't it get the last one? Why?

The Shoggoth wanted to rage, to boil the unseen one. But it couldn't find them. It couldn't—

A final string pierced deep, and the Shoggoth's Magical Resistance cracked wide open.

For the first time, the Shoggoth cried out from someone invading its mind, instead of the other way around.

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It took the better part of three minutes of hitting, running, jumping from mind to mind, and then striking the strange creature from new angles before its Magical Resistance finally crumbled. With each stabbing strand, Uva found herself digging a little deeper, dipping her awareness briefly into the odd being's mind.

The knowledge that splashed over into her was discordant, alien, but ultimately fresh. Its mind was like nothing she had ever linked with—not even the Jealousy. In fact, the Greater Demon felt practically human compared to this thing.

It was called a Shoggoth. She wasn't sure what that was. But then again, there were countless creatures from many far-flung worlds, many strange places, scattered across stranger dimensions yet.

By now, the battlefield was in complete disarray. Confriga had unleashed the creature right upon the abyssal gateway. There, it conducted the bulk of its slaughter, pushing the Blood Horrors and vampires back. But at the same time, its limbs reached far, grasping the nearby vanguards from Confriga's front line. The defenders were not spared. Worse, the Shoggoth's many eyes unleashed beams of shadowy light that cut through sections of Confriga's army, beams that drew Pathbearers into the Shoggoth's body.

Inside, Uva could see them writhing, could hear their minds screaming as they slowly came apart. They boiled alive, their beings dissolving into the black mass that composed the Shoggoth. She wasn't sure what this thing was, but an instinctual, existential dread washed over her. The Shoggoth shouldn't exist here. Not in this plane, not in this reality, not anywhere nearby. She had no idea where Confriga got his sword, or what this monster he summoned truly was. But she intuitively knew, in a place deeper than her bones, that he could not be allowed to wield Absence against her and her companions.

When she finally tapped into this thing's consciousness, she would direct it against Confriga, and she would try to take that sword from him, no matter the cost.

"Stop it! Stop! Show yourself! Show!" the Shoggoth howled, and to Uva's displeasure, the sound came with an echoing chorus, everyone it had consumed howling from within it. The very nature of its being was wrong. But unfortunately for the Shoggoth, it still had a mind. And Uva directed every single one of her curling mana strands across all angles to converge.

They swept over the Shoggoth, slashing into it, collapsing around it in a tightening net that she squeezed and squeezed. Uva ignored the beginnings of mana strain as she pushed hard. And before she truly got exhausted, the Shoggoth broke, its Magical Resistance detonating.

But unlike the cracking of an ordinary Pathbearer, its external shroud splattered apart. No longer was the Shoggoth wrapped in darkness. The protective shadows burst away. Beneath, its true skin was slimy and slick. There were bubbling pustules and festering bumps that expanded across its entire body, and disgusting, intertwined strands of drooping flesh dangled before its many mouths, around its many eyes, flapping from its many reaching limbs.

She saw how the Pathbearers within these pustules were slowly being dissolved moment by moment, turned to unattuned mana. And as she wove herself into the Shoggoth, she found herself surprised that she needed literally all of her mind to wrestle its ego into submission. It wasn't just how large its consciousness felt, but how many parts made her mind recoil—how many parts she had to seal away to protect herself.

The Shoggoth began lashing at itself. "Let go! Let go! What are you doing, creature? Obey me! Kill it!" Confriga roared from above, but the Shoggoth thrashed chaotically. Its massive limbs smashed through the bridge connecting the first building to the Abyssal gateway. It burst apart, but the limb cracked and splattered. It was bleeding, and the Pathbearers contained within its pustule leaked out.

Suddenly, they were screaming, falling through the air, traumatized but still alive. Confriga held his blade up. Absence shimmered unnaturally. Darkness shouldn't be bright

. But as he stroked cuts into the Shoggoth from afar, cursing as he tried to bend the monster into compliance, Uva tightened every fiber of her mana around its chaotic, inhuman mind.

It was like trying to tie a rope around water in certain places. The monster leaked through and into her, and her mind reeled at the intrusion. But not for long. Psychomancers learned how to control their own minds first, and to block off things they couldn't deal with. It was essential when facing mentally ill

adversaries. She applied the same techniques here. She made knots with her own mind, blocking away the parts of the Shoggoth that were too alien as she tapped into the parts that she understood. It took all of her Parallel Thinking to achieve the feat.

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And it took every bit of her Parallel Thinking to keep it suppressed as well. It wasn't human at all, but it was still close enough to her that she could understand some of its impulses, especially hunger, desire and hatred, and curiosity. But it was immense. Even its mind felt cancerous in some ways. Just bulbous clumps of ideas and thoughts clustered together. The best thing she could compare its consciousness to was that of an extreme schizophrenic that was also psionically infectious in some ways.

Uva winced. She suspected she might be among the few Psychomancers in Weave that could deal with something like this.

WHO ARE YOU WHO ARE YOU EAT YOU DIGEST BURN LET GO—

There was no break in its thoughts. The Shoggoth's mind constantly jumped from impulse to impulse. It struggled against her, but she severed the link between its ego and its body. She assumed that position, tightening herself as she held back a snarl of effort. But it was done. Just as she had melded her mind with the Jealousy and secured it under her control, so too did she enchain the Shoggoth, albeit partially.

And suddenly, the beast stopped. It turned away from the badly battered and mauled forces of the First Blood. There were still Blood Horrors and vampires splashing through the gateway, but they were clearly fewer than before. Most of the Master-Tier vampires were setting up layers of blood wardings against the Shoggoth that would allow them to maintain a final foothold in this gate.

But Uva was no longer interested in them now. She suspected that she did more than enough damage to the invading forces of the First Blood. So the Shoggoth turned, and even as Confriga slashed his long blade through the air, splitting parts of the Shoggoth open, hurting it brutally, she directed it forward. And it drew from all the Pathbearers trapped within its being.

The Shoggoth sapped their very skills, dissolving them into raw ambient mana, spending them as it blasted through the air. For a moment, the Shoggoth wasn't a Master—it was Heroic, and it moved at a speed unnatural for a beast that size. The air combusted. The Shoggoth struck the center of Confriga's army, and a blast wave of immense heat crashed over them, an avalanche of an inferno greeting the ever-crashing blizzard unleashed by the mana core. The sheer struggle between fire and ice released a dense coat of fog in the air. As the monster came to a halt, Uva found the Shoggoth almost withering, strained and weakened.

And that's when Uva learned another bit about the monster's unnatural nature. It didn't truly have levels of its own. No, it had stomachs, organs meant to store a skill. Most of them now were listed as unfed. Unfed because the Pathbearers it consumed were gone. Each Pathbearer consumed was converted into ambient mana, and Uva was horrified to realize it was literally spending their skill levels as currency.

In fact, the Shoggoth seemed to have its own interface, but the notifications it got were so alien and incomprehensible that she had to turn her mind away. Every time it used a skill, it was spent. But the Pathbearer usually fully came apart into a slurry of ambient mana before a skill was entirely used up.

The existential dread Uva felt spiked to new heights. Whatever this creature was, she suspected it was born to kill Pathbearers like her. And now it needed to feed again.

"So feed," Uva commanded. And despite its struggling, despite its eldritch nature, it still had hunger and desire, and Uva bent that to her will most of all.

It lashed out with its eyes. But without the shadowy layer of its Magical Resistance shrouding it, she saw that it was actually projecting viscous nets out from the center of its irises. Nets that were actually its many stomachs. It caught Pathbearers within those nets, and the sticky substance immediately grasped them tight and began to sear them in body and soul.

The sudden betrayal by the Shoggoth caught Confriga off guard, and also his forces as well. "Stop! Stop, you mongrel creature!" Confriga yelled. "You are mine! Your Eldest offered you to me to serve me! Stop!" He was cutting violently, severing large portions of its flesh. The Shoggoth was screaming inside Uva. But she didn't care. This wasn't her body, nor was this her monster. She was just borrowing it.

And then Uva had the Shoggoth digest all the Pathbearers it consumed. She fed all of their power into it, focusing on one skill and one skill alone: Reflexes. The Shoggoth leapt up into the air like it was a living mana bomb going off.

The customs and processing building ceased to be, entirely dissolved from the sheer kinetic force rippling off the hundred-meter-long creature's body. All but the hardest Pathbearers within Confriga's defender core were dissolved into bloody mush. Even the Master-Tiers were thrown back and sent reeling across the gate.

That hit might even stun Shiv for a while, Uva thought proudly. Then, she considered the thought further. Well, until he dies and just... gets stronger. Profoundly unfair in my opinion, but quite effective.

Confriga, meanwhile, reeled back as the Shoggoth slammed into its former master, roaring more in frustration and rage than actual fear. He tried to lash his blade down at the Shoggoth, but it bit down on his arm first with a jagged mouth.

It only ended up breaking all its teeth.

Confriga tore his blade out a second later, and the Shoggoth was almost immediately split in half. Moreover, she felt something clash against the Shoggoth's very soul.

"Cease!" Confriga roared. He drove his many-petaled wings into the Shoggoth, and they pierced the beast's flesh deep. Without Magical Resistance, it suffered the impact directly, and the Shoggoth combusted from the inside. But it didn't have organs like a person did. No, it was mostly made up of strange nerve centers and those pustules. So it fought on, unburdened by anything but pain.

And since Uva wielded it, pain was relegated to the Shoggoth while she maintained a clear head.

"You are meant to obey!" Confriga punched the Shoggoth. For a moment, she expected just a hard impact. However, where the Gate Lord's fist struck, a channel formed—a channel of ever-building force. It drove a deep wound into the Shoggoth's flesh that just kept going. And though it endured for a moment, a hole was blasted clean through the Shoggoth.

The remains of digested Pathbearers blasted out from the other side. The Shoggoth screamed. Uva turned the creature's eyes on Confriga next. Viscous nets splashed over the Gate Lord, but the Vulteg let out a roar as he flexed his body. A colossal shockwave of force sent her and the Shoggoth blasting across the gate at agonizing speeds. Parts of the Shoggoth tore away as it was driven against a distant plaza of Gate Theborn. Its arms were dismembered from the impact, and its body was burning from how fast it was flung. It tumbled several more times before it crashed body-first against a tower, which was enough to send the entire structure crashing down on the Shoggoth. Jagged beams of reinforced metal split into its hewed body, splitting it in half entirely.

And the Gate Lord let out a roar of absolute fury in the aftermath. And it was then that Uva realized the Gate Lord was over five kilometers away. But Confriga didn't have any time to deal with the Shoggoth.

For the first blasts of Biomancy crashed against him. She heard him grunt in discomfort. Tapping into the mind of a mercenary fleeing from the battle, she saw a swelling tsunami of flesh, jagged teeth, and wounds splash into his remaining forces. The First Blood was taking advantage of the opening she caused.

And that pulled Confriga's attention back to the true battle at hand. Uva tried to make the Shoggoth rise, but it was simply too broken.

Without Pathbearers to digest, it had no more Toughness. And so it lay there, slowly bleeding its vile fluids onto the plaza. But it still had breath inside itself, and it could still shout. And at that moment, Uva considered a new and final, asymmetric angle of attack.

An angle that might make up for her not managing to take Confriga's blade out of the fight.

She had the Shoggoth shout a declaration across the city. "Gate Lord Confriga has abandoned us!" it roared. "The gate is falling! The First Blood is inside! The gate is falling! It's falling! Abandon all hope!"

The Shoggoth's voice choked off, but the words it did manage were loud enough to echo across the entire gate.

Uva untangled herself from the Shoggoth. Or at least she tried to. The complexities of its nature were too much, and with a frustrated groan, she pushed herself out forcibly, as she did with the Dragon-Knights. Its inner body burst apart, every single pustule lining its flesh splattered apart as Uva emerged, staggering into the coldness and the light.

Turning back, she saw how the Shoggoth fully melted away into fetid, festering bile.

The smell was horrible, and her Magical Resistance suffered constant damage from the sheer coldness unleashed by the mana core above, so Uva got aboard her shield and prepared to flee until she could find another body to jump into.

But then the mana core flickered, and it shook, and with a final flash, a notification entered her eyes.

Desynchronization in progress: Lesser Mashal Confriga is no longer recognized as [Gate Lord]

And Uva smiled. She smiled as she got on her shield and sailed under the districts, underneath the bridges and plazas, avoiding notice. She sailed as Confriga howled in absolute outrage. And for the first time in days, the temperature in Gate Theborn began to climb. She grinned in relief.

That would—

The Stranger's gaze is upon you.

Uva frowned. Stranger?

Skill Gained: Eldritch Insight (Master)

Eldritch Insight > 1

Chapter 82 (I) Fall [I]

Of all the worlds I have raided, broken, and subjugated, you humans, and this Integrated Earth of yours, are the most fascinating people and the most fascinating world I have witnessed. For you see, I see so much of you that's alike to me, yet so much of you that runs counter. You are a little paradox, you funny little apes. You and the elves you adopted, and the goblins, and your precious machines that you consider kindred. So very confusing, but ultimately a delight, a delight to face in battle.

You are my desired whetstone. And I wish to tell you why. Because of culture

For the past 400 years, I have been besieging your Lone Star Kingdom. Proud people, people of range and artillery. So cold. So impersonal. But so clever, determined, and hard of spirit. People who have adjusted their entire culture just to keep me and mine at bay. But we quite like it here. We desire this exchange, this cultural adaptation. We like your trench lines. We like raiding them. We like your artillery. We like surviving them.

We like your psychology and your governmental structure, especially. Why, there is nothing I enjoy more than avoiding your rangers, slipping behind your cities, and then toppling them from within. There's nothing sweeter than just killing a Gate Lord without anyone understanding how or why. Just dead one day. Their flayed pieces left on the walls of your greatest building, within the halls that you think are most defended. And I love working down the list, finding everyone else you assume to be worthy of being Gate Lord and killing them too.

Or perhaps making bargains. You see, that's another thing I love about you, people of Integrated Earth. You make bargains. You're willing to betray everything for power. Or are you willing to betray power for everything else? It's always up in the air with your kind.

I have seen powerful Gate Lords fall to me. Not because they were weaker, but because, well, I strapped their child under my shield. And they couldn't bring their force to bear.

A child? What a laughable thing, yes. It's just four or five years old. That's barely a blink in a Pathbearer's life. Just cut them down and make another one. But no. No, the animal instinct in you is so strong, and you cling so hard. But then I see some of you, some who have the eyes of an orc, the heart of an orc.

And as I stand, with children and their loved ones surrounding me, there is just a moment of hesitation. And then you say the words that make me fall in love with you. Burn them, burn them all, bomb them, bomb them all! So much certitude, so much self-mutilation. But in the end, you choose the path of power, and you hold your gate.

I love this. The System loves this. And this makes us more of who we are. Every decision that doesn't kill us makes us. It shapes our history, our legend. And from legend, we rise. And the story grows evermore.

So fight hard, children of Lone Star. Fight hard, bleed hearty. For I will be here forever and ever, so long as you have steel in your blood and hate in your veins. And I pledge never to truly collapse your kingdom. I will simply break a few of your Lords, just to remind you that I'm here, just to remind you that this is an exchange and not truly an execution.

For if I wanted you dead, you would be.

-The Culturist, Legendary Orc War Maestro

The elemental golem struggled to crush Shiv's head, even with both limbs of crashing water infused with lightning pressing down on him. He simply reached into its chest and closed his fingers. Its mana core

detonated, and Shiv briefly let out a slight grunt of pain as the left side of his body swelled with searing agony.

He was slowly getting used to it, acclimating to how badly it hurt all the time. It still wasn't pleasant, and it affected his spellcasting without the Song of the Vigilant, but he could make do for now. In fact, getting hurt pissed him off, and getting pissed was fuel for his skills, thanks to his second Feat.

In a few strange ways, he was stronger than ever.

"Where the hell are they?" Shiv asked himself. He saw that the adamantine elevator leading through the third gateway to Vulketh had been severed. Its edges were corroded; clear evidence of Necromancy having been used. And he had a pretty good guess as to who did it. Despite this, Adam was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Uva. He couldn't see any of her mana strands, and if she was nearby, he suspected she would have reached into his mind already.

"Can Hu, you got eyes on them?" Shiv asked.

The Penitent briefly tapped into the sensory feeds of its hidden drones. Most of them were moving in on the automata slaves, about to free them from their bondage. But a few were atop the tallest buildings within the gate. Small screens opened in the corner of Shiv's vision. They showed just how devastated Gate Theborn truly was. Entire sections of the gate had collapsed. The mana bombs unleashed by the agents of Aviary were potent. Potent enough to outright obliterate several buildings, including critical barracks, the gate's agricultural fields, and over 20 residences, many of which had tumbled down into the molten rivers.

Something clenched inside Shiv's chest. The people in this gate were suffering. Always suffering. Every time someone fought here, people died. But soon, that was going to come to an end.

Just then, something tore open beside Shiv. He snapped to attention. His kukri appeared in his hand, equipped to his soul as it was. He prepared to attack the incoming Jump Mage—only to see Adam fly out through the rift, emerging with burning wings and a relieved expression on his face.

"Shiv, Broken Moon! I've been checking and searching the entire gate for the last five minutes."

"Sorry," Shiv said. "I was briefly caught up inside the teleportation anchor. Had to recover for a bit with Can Hu. But the anchor's not gonna be an issue anymore." Shiv let out a low chuckle as he thought back to what he did to the vampires, and to the anchor in particular. "I butchered their backline forces before they could build up and cut off their way in. I killed one of the First Blood's Heroes and even bagged myself an owl."

"An owl?" Adam said, his eyes widening.

"Yeah," Shiv said. He reached into his cloak and pulled out the bound owl. The man struggled and kicked in futility. Adam flinched back in disgust and near-pity.

"Did you have to bind him in layers of your skin?" Adam asked, his expression souring.

Shiv shrugged. "I didn't really have anything better. It was in the heat of the moment. Besides, it's adamantine skin. He can't easily break out. He doesn't have the strength for it. And the owl here knows..." Shiv held the owl up so he could speak right where the agent's ear was. The owl's courage shuddered and cracked. "...that if he tries to do anything, I'll take his limbs from him, one by one. Isn't that right?"

The owl just whimpered and licked at his teeth—or rather, a gap where a couple were missing.

Shiv just chuckled. "Funny thing about Biomancy, it lets you detect some interesting things, such as hollow teeth with poison capsules inside." The owl's tongue flicked around and continued desperately searching, but to no avail. "Yeah, I got all of them. Bite your tongue off again if you want. I will use the Woundeater on you. Understand, you're not dying, you're giving us what we want. And afterward, well, if you still want to die, I might oblige you."

Dread Aura > 76

The owl shuddered and sobbed. Adam grimaced. "Shiv, is this necessary?"

The Deathless smirked. "It's good for my Dread Aura."

"Yes, well, you're using it on me too."

Shiv nodded. "Yeah, I'm always leveling Dread Aura. And you scream funny when you're scared, so that's a bonus."

Adam sneered. "Bastard."

"Don't worry, Adam. You're more courageous than most, even if you do shiver like a leaf sometimes."

The Young Lord scoffed. "Well, the owl is a good capture. Well done, Shiv. Uva's going to love this. Right, the anchor. You said you eliminated it—"

"Yeah, I completely destroyed it."

Adam blinked. "Completely?"

"Yep," Shiv said, smiling innocently. "I just gripped it and twisted until it was almost entirely crumpled, then I twisted it until the sides tore too. Like a can. Pretty good workout."

Adam just stared at him. "You crumpled the Jealousy's teleportation anchor, the one you described as being almost 400 meters long."

"It was a bit over 400 meters, I think," Shiv said, stretching his arms nonchalantly to flex his muscles while looking around. "It was kind of exhausting, but yeah, not too much trouble."

For a beat, the Young Lord said nothing. "You understand that you could have just damaged the parts where the spells were."

"Yeah, Can Hu told me, but..." Shiv shrugged. "You know, I kind of wanted to break stuff, especially after all that misery the vampires and the Aviary agents put me through. Blow off some steam and burn through my anger."

Adam clearly didn't know whether he wanted to laugh or cry at that moment. "Shiv, we're kind of busy right now, if you haven't noticed," he said, gesturing at distant explosions going off at the Abyssal gateway. "So maybe leave the 'blowing off steam' for after we kill Confriga and finish this Quest."

Shiv was actually about to acquiesce when he noticed something in the Young Lord's expression. He folded his arms and simply smirked. And after a moment, Adam cracked and started laughing in disbelief. "But that does sound insane."

Then, he turned around, and the radiance of a rising sun and sky-blue light bloomed in his eyes as he searched for Uva, but he didn't need to wait long until her strands shot through an obsidian building and bound her thoughts to theirs.

"Uva," Shiv said, "how are things going at the Abyssal Gateway?"

"Perfectly unstable," Uva described the situation. She filtered a few of her memories as the sheer blast of details flooded their minds. Then, she started modulating her experiences within the Shoggoth as both Shiv and Adam clutched their heads and struggled not to throw up. "Sorry, a lot happened."

"It's fine," Shiv said, clenching his teeth. "It's just... What the hell did you take over at the end there?"

"I think it's called a Shoggoth. I'm not sure what it is," Uva said. "And I've never heard of anything like it, nor seen any creature do what it did."

"Perhaps we should ask Valor about it when we have time," Adam suggested.

Both the Young Lord and the Deathless shared their memories with Uva and each other, and for a moment, they all rendered each other speechless.

Shiv broke the silence with a guffaw. "We really tore some shit up, didn't we?"

"I suppose you can describe it that way," Uva said, and her coolness came with a vicious undercurrent of pride. "Right now, it's mainly Confriga against the dwindling remnants of the First Blood. If you ask me, I suspect he can win. But that will take some time and probably leave his forces in utter tatters, and it will leave him distracted and pinned. Moreover, he is no longer the Gate Lord."

"Very nice job," Adam said. The Young Lord's excitement was rising, and once more he cast his senses into the tower. For a moment, he just thought, and Shiv gave him the space to do so.

The Deathless turned his thoughts on Uva. "You alright?" he asked. He sensed a bit of unease from her still. More unease than she usually bore.

"Yes. The mind I took was simply alien, unlike anything I've ever seen. Even the Jealousy was practically human compared to the Shoggoth."

"Practically human." Shiv had briefly been mind-bonded with the Jealousy. And he cringed at the memory. "If the Jealousy is practically human compared to the Shoggoth, I don't ever want to know what a Shoggoth is like."

"It's actually quite fascinating," Uva said, her mind shivering with excitement. She had done something few Psychomancers ever did, and she enjoyed it. "The way it sees the world, it's like there are certain parts of its mind that are absolutely blank. There's no point of symmetry between my thoughts and its. But it does have things like hunger and hatred, and an understanding of the world. But there are also things... things beyond that. Things that I had to ignore altogether, lest they damage my sanity. I even got a skill from it, though I'm not sure what it does yet."

"Yeah, well, I'm glad you didn't get your sanity damaged. I don't know where I'd find another Jealousy, but I would find one and have to kill it and cook it to get your mind to regenerate."

"Just for me?" Uva said teasingly.

"Yeah, of course, just for you." Shiv paused. "Hell, I'd fight an army of Jealousies for you. Every last Jealousy in existence, even. And I mean it."

"Shiv, stop. We're in the middle of the battlefield."

Shiv shrugged, "And that's a problem for me?"

Uva bit back a laugh.

"Well, it is a bloody problem for me," Adam said, interrupting both of them. He glared at Shiv.

"I'm not sorry," Shiv said. "I'll say it all to her again. And mean it twice as much."

Silver Tongue > 20

"I know," Adam groaned. "And it makes me want to kill myself. Okay. From what I can tell, we have a series of follow-up objectives now. Our initial run has been very successful. Confriga has been Desynchronized from the mana core of the gate. So right now, he won't be able to respond easily. He won't be able to dispatch forces, since those are almost all dead. And the people here will be looking for someone else to rely on in the meantime."

"Guardshead Leu," Shiv said immediately. "She's known. She's effective. And frankly, I think we can use her as the next Gate Lord."

Chapter 82 (II) Fall [I]

Adam hesitated. "I'm not convinced the Guardshead is trustworthy, Shiv. After we kill Confriga, who's to say she won't turn on us?"

Shiv considered that for a moment. He didn't know Guardshead Leu that well, aside from what his Foreshadowing showed him. But he did know this: She wasn't nearly strong enough to kill Confriga on her own, and she probably couldn't reliably even hurt Shiv. "I don't think she's going to be that much of a problem for any of us, Adam. Frankly, if she's going to betray us, she'd better have a really good plan, even with the mana core, because between your dimensional arrows, Uva's Psychomancy, and me, well, just charging in and ripping her in half, what's she going to do?"

The Young Lord considered that, then grunted. "Fine, we can try having her installed. That'll take some work, though. The gate is in pretty dire condition, and the people are busy hiding."

"We don't need to try," Uva said. "I simply need to find the most important people still remaining in the gate, and have them carry the message." Her strands immediately began spreading out. "It might take some time, but it's doable."

"Right! Psychomancer! Fantastic! But in the meantime..." Adam regarded Confriga's obsidian tower. And then he looked at the third gateway. His jaw clenched. "I think a series of opportunities lies open before us. The weaver breeding facility. You said that was inside this tower too, Shiv?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. He looked up at the tower and understood what Adam was planning. "Right, we can go in and try to take care of that. Figure out what the operation is."

"Yes, but we can also eliminate what defenders remain inside the tower. It's very lightly defended right now. And between the three of us, we can clear it out quickly. But once we get to the upper level, I want you to reach out with your Gravitic Wrestler. And I want you to break the base of the tower connected to the plaza above."

"Break the base," Shiv thought. "Why?"

"Because I want to seal the third gateway temporarily, no matter what. Confriga hasn't called in reinforcements yet, but I don't want to risk anything. That tower, at least its head, should be able to block things. Even a Master would take some time to blast through. And we would definitely notice while they do."

Shiv paused, and he let out an approving chuckle. "That's a pretty good plan, Adam. I kinda like it."

"You're only saying that because I'm having you break things," Adam said, deadpan. "In the meantime, I briefly looked through the tower. There seem to be several rooms of interest and some critical personnel we should still eliminate. But aside from the breeding facility, there are also the slaves and... what seems to be a vault."

"A vault?" Shiv asked.

"Yes. Confriga has another hidden room near the middle of the tower. I think it is a personal treasure vault of some kind."

"Treasury," Shiv said, sounding excited. "Well, I do think that we deserve a bit of an extra reward for all the work we've been putting in here."

Uva let out a slight huff. "The Arachnae Order thinks very lowly of robbers and scoundrels." She paused. "Thankfully, the Arachnae Order is nowhere near here, and we're robbing Compact. So. That makes this a repossession operation. I think I'm looking forward to this."

By this point, practically all three of them were grinning.

"And then there's the matter of the slaves," Adam said, a slight growl entering his voice.

"Shiv," Can Hu interjected. "I have freed the automata slaves. They are beginning the uprising. I've transmitted my messages to them. They understand what is about to happen and what is at stake."

Adam. Eliminate the most essential and dangerous slaver overseers, and the uprising should be able to handle itself. I will see to it through my drones in the meantime."

Shiv conveyed the information to Adam, and the Young Lord let out a breath. "Ah, Can Hu, I didn't realize how busy you were."

"I will take that as a compliment," Can Hu replied. "The local slavers didn't notice either."

"And when all that's done..." Shiv said. He stared at his own skull-helmed reflection in his stellarite kukri and found a surge of excitement rushing through him. "I think we're going to pay Confriga a collective visit."

"Yes, but all of us, at once. And when he's weakened," Uva stressed. "Something is wrong with his sword. Deeply wrong. He summoned the Shoggoth using it, and I think that's only the tip of its capabilities. If I had to guess, it must have a Heroic-Tier Enchantment. At the very minimum."

"At minimum," Shiv muttered. He'd fought Master-Tier adversaries with Master-Tier weapons. But a piece of Heroic-Tier equipment... His Mask of False Paths was one such thing. But while it would have been a miracle item in the hands of a proper spy, it was not meant for war. He wondered just what Absence could do.

"Fine, then," Shiv said. "We'll all have a piece of him together. And remember, we promised to bring Valor along. We gotta save something for the old man."

Adam stared at Shiv. "I'm going to tell him you called him that."

"And tell him whatever you want. He still likes me more than you."

Adam sneered. "Oh, that might change sometime."

"Sure it will, Young Lord."

"That might change," Adam repeated, narrowing his eyes. They both snorted at each other. And then the moment of levity broke, and all three assumed a mental state of battle readiness.

"Alright," Adam said. "I'm going airborne, as far and high up as I can go while staying in range of Uva's strands."

"For your arrows?" Shiv asked.

"Yes," Adam said. "Distance is damage, and I've had enough of this close-quarters bullshit for a day."

Shiv nodded. "I'm gonna go inside and, I think, rip some stuff up. I'll move through the tower as fast as I can."

"I'll step through my rift and assist you if necessary," Adam said. "Well, maybe." He flashed his saber, and his clones began to appear. "Maybe I'll just send one of my peons." The other Adams looked at the original, annoyed.

Unauthorized duplication: this tale has been taken without consent. Report sightings.

"Yeah, he makes me feel that way sometimes too," Shiv said.

The bulk of Uva's mind drifted away from them. "I will plant thoughts marking Guardshead Leu as the new Gate Lord. I will try to work fast, and I will assist you all in the meantime. I will also keep an eye on the situation at the gateway. Be prepared to respond summarily. We cannot let Confriga emerge unscathed, and we cannot let the First Blood overrun this place and slay him."

And then she paused. "Ah, another thing. I will try to hunt down the remaining Aviary and First Blood assets within the gate. There are some still lurking about. I'm pretty sure I quelled a lesser vampire outbreak a district away."

And with their new tasks assigned, the group went forth, each of them focusing on another section while staying connected to each other through Uva's mind.

With Confriga distracted and his army in shambles, Shiv moved with the subtlety of a wrecking ball. He blasted against the underside of the obsidian tower and carved his way through. This time, he didn't bother plugging the gap behind him. He simply left it open. He didn't intend for the obsidian tower to remain standing by the end of this anyway.

Once inside, he began smashing his way from the bottom up. He still kept his Silhouette active, just to make himself hard to track. Walls, floors, and rooms were left in ruins as he passed through. The guards of the obsidian tower were slaughtered with prejudice. And ease. Confriga had only left a skeleton crew behind, taking the rest of his elites out into battle.

The main enemies he had faced now were usually just elemental dimensionals. And they rarely lasted that long.

As he climbed the tower, however, he began seeing Adam's handiwork as well. He would get to a new floor and find most of the enemies there already dead. The weaker ones were little more than a smear of blood against the ground. The stronger ones had holes through their body. Holes the size of a Veilpiercer.

"Adam, are you killing my victims?" Shiv sent.

"They're not yours if I'm killing them first, are they?" Adam shot back tauntingly.

"Oh, so it's like that now," Shiv replied.

"Has it ever been another way?" Adam asked.

The Deathless gritted his teeth. The asshole needed a lesson. "Fine then, let's make it a competition."

"Ha! Let's not, I already shot everyone worth shooting in the building."

Shiv paused. "What do you mean you shot everyone else in the building?"

"It's exactly what it sounds like," Adam said nonchalantly. "As it turns out, when you have a great many clones, and they can all use Veilpiercers, clearing buildings becomes extraordinarily easy. You should try it sometime. If you ever develop those skills."

Shiv's mind went blank for a while. "I... I was..."

"You were kind of looking forward to ripping through people and smashing your way up through every floor?"

"Yeah, kinda."

"Aww, but you can still smash the building, Shiv!"

"But no people to kill means it doesn't feel completely right."

"You'll just have to be faster next time. Or maybe, I don't know, develop a skill with more precision and finesse."

And for the first time in a while, Adam was truly managing to annoy Shiv. The Deathless would be impressed if he weren't so, well, annoyed.

"Well, come on, Shiv, get a move on," Adam said. The moment of back and forth between them was over. "We have objectives to secure and a Quest to finish. Stay on target, monster."

"Alright, Archer, let's get this thing done." He shot straight up through every floor, keeping his eyes open. But true to Adam's words, everyone worth killing was already dead. Shiv's annoyance turned into envy and slight admiration. Adam wasn't wrong about the precision and focus comment. A skill like that could help Shiv go a long way.

Frankly, if Shiv had been in Adam's situation, he would have needed to rush every single building at once, unless he kept the rapier. But frankly, the rapier was better with Adam anyway. All the clones were susceptible to damage and shared all the damage at that, and they didn't last very long either. Someone had to keep triggering them.

The rapier was good for an archer, good for someone who could move and use spatial magic. With the rapier, Adam became practically a minor artillery corps unto himself. Maybe not so minor anymore, now that he had the Veilpiercer Skill, the vambrace, and Spellstring.

And then Shiv considered how he might have handled Uva's situation. Not particularly well, actually. What she managed to do to both armies was far beyond Shiv's capabilities. He probably could have torn through a good number of them. Maybe even smashed through Confriga's vanguard. But he was, at his core, a brutal instrument.

And there were a good number of brutal instruments within Confriga's armies, along with the former Gate Lord himself. Shiv could have forced a fight and butchered a good portion of Confriga's army, but never engineered a collapse like Uva did.

Then again, considering how the other two would have operated within the confines of the teleportation anchor... Yeah, not very good, Shiv surmised.

Uva might do better than Adam if she kept jumping between bodies. But that was just the thing, she needed enemies with low or nonexistent Magical Resistance to perform to her fullest capabilities.

I just need to be there and keep going. And it was then that he appreciated being a part of a team again. For a while, he thought he could have done everything himself if he got strong enough. But it was as Valor had told him once, you needed to devote time, focus, and effort to every skill. And even if he had 10 Master-Tier Skills, he suspected there would still be numerous areas he needed to rely on Adam and Uva.

None of them could have brought this gate down alone. And that filled Shiv with a feeling of true camaraderie. A feeling the other two had as well.

As Shiv exploded out through the ground of the breeding facility, he found the conveyor belts unmoving, but there were hundreds of people still suspended along the entire belt until they passed through a gap into an adjacent room.

As Shiv called out to them, a few moaned. A great many were unresponsive, but a couple looked down. "I'm going to try to get you guys out and fix you up, all right?" Shiv called out.

"Please," an older man said. "Help us, help us..."

Just then, a thought came through from Adam. "Shiv, follow the conveyor belts. There are several people in the next room. They're hostiles."

"You didn't shoot them?" Shiv asked.

"No, they're not actually combatants, and more importantly... You'd best see for yourself. I think they have important information they can offer us. Uva. We will need you."

"Give me one second," Uva said, sounding slightly strained. "I will need some time to finish what I can, then I will devote another portion of my mind to this."

"Another portion of, oh yeah, that's right, Parallel Thinking." Adam reacted with naked envy. "I wish I had Parallel Thinking."

"Try doing multiple things at once very well," Uva replied absentmindedly.

Shiv did as he was asked. And though the Young Lord hadn't shot the people in the next room, he did put a few holes in the ground around them, leaving them huddled in the corner, boxed in. Shiv did a double-take as he entered the room.

It wasn't nearly as large a space as the room with the conveyor belts, but it had plenty of what looked like industrial-level equipment. And more importantly, there were open slots on the walls and even more slots running all the way up to the ceiling and across the walls. These slots were each filled with a person sealed in some kind of magical stasis pod. They all had eggs inside them too, and he sensed a little over a thousand people packed deep into the walls...

"What the hells," Shiv muttered.

A young woman whimpered beside him, hanging from the end of a conveyor belt. A line of other people pressed against her, all of them miserable, all of them clearly suspended there for a while. He could feel the eggs inside of them, writhing and twitching. And beneath the woman were those containers, the containers that held the other people currently slotted into the wall. There was no magic active yet, but the egg-bearers were clearly meant to be loaded into these things.

And then he finally noticed them, the uniformed people operating this room. Shiv did another take. They weren't Vultegs, or humans, or even Umbrals. They were Weaveresses.

Chapter 82 (III) Fall [I]

"Please," the frontmost of the Weaveresses said, her palps twitching, eight eyes wide with fear. All of them held all of their six arms up, clawed, humanoid fingers splayed wide in a gesture of supplication. "Do not kill us! We—we know, we know many things! We can do many things for you, yes! We can lay eggs, eggs, yes, can continue the process for you. Don't need to work for the Gate Lord anymore. Don't like the Gate Lord. Will work for you!"

"You're Weaveresses," Shiv breathed. It was a simple, stupid statement, but he was still taken aback.

And to his shock, Uva briefly stopped what she was doing and filled his mind. Her astonishment eclipsed his by far. "What?" she cried.

The times Shiv had seen Uva enter a state of shock were few and far between. But when the Umbral Psychomancer was stunned, she was really, truly stunned. For a moment, she didn't do anything. Her mana strands quivered as she tried to process what she was seeing.

Then they shot out and took all four of the rogue Weaveresses. Uva bound herself to them. Her mana strands turned away from the rest of the city, and for a single moment, she committed to a single, absolute task.

"Start freeing the people," Uva said with an urgent growl. "Get them down. Get the eggs out of them and the others." She paused. "Composer, there are so many. We will need to figure that out later, but save who you can now. I will figure out the exact details of this operation and this conspiracy." She practically snarled those last words, and Shiv got to work.

"I'll stay on overwatch," Adam said. "Work fast, Shiv. Something's happening at the Abyssal Gateway."

"Don't worry, I got it," Shiv replied. He stared at the conveyor belt and the people, and he flared his Biomancy. He gave his magic some time to recover earlier, and his mana field still felt sore, but plucking the weaver eggs out from the people wasn't that much effort.

When he was done, he gathered some curtains and a few skin decoys for the people he had just rescued to use as blankets. Most of them seemed traumatized. All of them were slaves of some kind, and slaves who were near the end of their use at that. Beyond broken for some reason or another. Shiv clenched his teeth as disgust and hatred boiled inside of him.

Not only was Confriga feeding slaves to the Jealousy, he was doing this sick shit here. "You're all going to be..." Shiv's word trailed off. He nearly said all right, but he could tell from their gazes and the scars marring their bodies that all right was definitely not in their near future. A large cluster of weaver's eggs also filled his dimensional cloak. A muffled groan came from the owl, and Shiv jostled them momentarily, warning the man not to bite his own tongue again and to not touch the eggs. Shiv decided then to take all the owl's teeth, just in case.

"Adam, how's the coast looking?" Shiv asked briefly.

"Still clear, but I think the last bits of Confriga's front line have collapsed. It's mainly his elites and what mages remain now. The forces of the First Blood are also thinning, but they're still coming. It might not be a flood, but it's still a river. I took a peek outside and, well, it doesn't look good. It looks like an entire bloody invading army smashed into this place. The gate's guards have been flayed and their organs are impaled on pikes. No wonder Ikki and the others couldn't inform us. It looks like the entire horizon is infested. They likely had to pull out in a hurry."

"Infested?" Shiv asked.

"Yes, the damned vampires spilled blood over everything with some large-scale spell. There's a cloud raining gore and viscera. Disgusting."

Shiv sighed at that. "Everything they do is disgusting. You would have hated the teleportation anchor, Adam," Shiv said. "Just the smell of fighting them alone in an enclosed space..."

Young Lord nearly gagged. "I can practically smell some of them from up here. I'm glad we all chose to focus on the tasks we chose."

A series of agreements was exchanged between the three, and Uva extracted herself from the Weaveresses. One of them was entirely unresponsive, viciously spasming. "I broke her during interrogation," Uva said, her voice filled with quiet fury. "They were... They were members of Elaboration. They are supposed to be dead—ambushed while doing a field study. They defected. To Compact."

"What?" Shiv asked.

"And there are more of them.. Allies inside Weave. Traitors. Adam, I need you to bring them to the teleportation anchor—our teleportation anchor, and store them there."

"Oh, right," Shiv said. "While you do that, there's someone else you gotta interrogate later." He pulled out the owl, and Uva stared at the writhing body coated in skin decoys. "It's an owl," Shiv said, "an Aviary agent, taken alive."

And suddenly Shiv felt a lightness break the storm clouds inside Uva. "Shiv,"

she sighed, "that writhing body is practically a bundle of roses in your hands."

Shiv grinned. "I'll endeavor to kidnap more people for you."

A Veilpiercer tore into the room. Shiv grunted with amusement.

"For the love of bloody hell," Adam muttered as he emerged into the room through a rift. He eyed the Weaveresses, including the one with a mind broken, and began to channel his Dimensionality over them. A shroud of darkness and distortion collapsed inward, and they were gone, cast to where the teleportation anchor was. And for a moment, Adam stared at Shiv.

"Right, I probably need to inform Valor about what's going on. Might be a little confusing for him. I'll be back very soon." And then he teleported as well.

Leaving only Uva and Shiv there for a moment. "So," Shiv said, "what do you think we should do with the victims?" He looked at the few hundred people gathered in the room.

Uva just sighed. "We can't let them stay here. Get them across the dimensional pathway Adam left, perhaps?"

"Yeah, no," Shiv said, "that leads up into the sky."

She paused. "Then we wait for Adam to come back and have him fire an arrow somewhere else. I'll inform him. You keep going up. I think there's a vault you need to hit, isn't there?"

"Thanks for reminding me."

As Uva's strands spread out among the freed victims, Shiv shot upwards. He smashed through the ceiling and kept going, blasting higher and higher until he hit the midsection of the building. And there, his surroundings changed. No more corridors and hallways or elevators. It was like a wide-open lobby, but at the center was a massive cylindrical vault. There were a few dozen guards here, but they lay with holes in the center of their chests.

Most of them were blade dimensionals, or Metal Fiends, as Uva called them. Shiv had fought them several weeks back while raiding a slave caravan in the Umbral Wilderness. It looked like someone had pulverized the room with focused artillery strikes. And then there was an elemental golem. A golem that had several channels of corrosion carved through it.

Doubtless a result of Adam's vambrace giving power to some of his arrows.

Shiv considered how a fight between him and Adam might go now. Probably suicidal for both of them, depending on how close Shiv was. Once more, Shiv considered why the System gave Adam the vambrace. Something inside him knew that it was probably going to drive them against each other at some point.

Because what brought more strife than a team collapsing in on itself?

As Shiv stared at the vault, he realized it was adamantine as well and considered waiting for Adam. He decided against it. He'd torn a titanium-reinforced teleportation anchor apart before. Let's see...

He placed his gravity field against the vault, and it began to twist. For a few moments, nothing happened. Shiv gritted his teeth and twisted harder. The vault door began to shudder and groan, and Shiv groaned with it. The door squealed—Then a series of corrosive arrows impacted the same point over and over again, just over Shiv's head. A tunnel carved into the vault, and Shiv immediately blasted backward, letting out a hiss of surprise and dissatisfaction as Uva reconnected him with Adam.

"Shiv," Adam said, "You don't really need to rip apart every bit of metal you see."

"What the hell was that?" Shiv said. "You're going to fire Necromantic arrows over my head? Really?"

"Oh, relax. I wasn't going to hit you."

Shiv narrowed his eyes. He knew Adam was accurate. He also knew Adam was probably doing that just to provoke him. "I'm going to get you for that, asshole," Shiv muttered under his breath.

Adam just laughed. Soon, a hole was burned through the center of the vault, and Shiv stepped through. As he did, a massive smile spread across his face. There were five items held in display cases. Wands, weapons, pieces of armor, and in one case, an entire armor set. One that seemed to be completely shaped entirely from focus crystal. Then there were all the mithril ingots lining the walls—so many ingots, treasure chests, gold, gems, and more.

Shiv began scooping everything he saw into his cloak. Starting with the armor set, everything went in. After he had swept everything obviously valuable, he came to a stop. At the very end of the vault, there was a book placed on a wooden reading stand.

It was lined in dense chains etched with spells and covered in strange pustules.

Strangest of all, the book was whispering to Shiv. He raised an eyebrow. Too bad he couldn't understand what it was saying.

CONFRIGA... IS THAT YOU? HAVE YOU COME TO CONTINUE YOUR EDUCATION? HAVE YOU COME WITH AN OFFER FOR ME? A PIECE OF YOUR SOUL FOR A PIECE OF MINE...

The words hammered against Uva's consciousness. For a moment, she felt the words crawling across and gnawing at her sanity, but she pushed away the insidious energies with a snarl of effort. What remained was the voice—calling out to the Lesser Marshal. And more importantly, Shiv wasn't looking at a book.

The physical object was just a facade. The longer Uva stared, the more the chains and tentacles peeled away to reveal a layered cluster of eyes staring back at her.

Eldritch Insight > 2

NOT CONFRIGA. NO. SOMEONE ELSE... HAVE YOU COME TO FREE ME? HAVE YOU COME TO TAKE ME OUT? AWAY FROM THIS PRISON?

Uva didn't respond to the book. Instead, she filtered her memories over to Shiv, and he grunted in surprise.

"You understand the creepy whispering?" he asked.

"Yes. I... This is part of my Eldritch Insight Skill, I think... Take the book too. Leave nothing. Whatever the book is, it knows about the Lesser Marshal. It's a piece of intelligence."

"Are you sure?" Shiv asked, sounding apprehensive. "I got a bad feeling about the book."

“We can't let Confriga have it. Also, you have the Odes. It cannot be worse than that, as long as we're careful.”

“Shit. You're right.”

Shiv walked over and picked up the book.

WHAT'S THIS? STRANGE SOUL... TEMPERED... STRANGE... MIND INSIDE HIS. MIND WITH OPENED EYES. HELLO, SEER OF THE ELDEST MYSTERIES. I GREET YOU. COME TO FREE ME? COME TO TAKE ME AWAY? I WILL PREPARE GIFTS FOR YOU. GIFTS FOR MY FREEDOM. ALLOW YOU TO DEEPEN YOUR INSIGHT. TEACH YOU TO REACH BEYOND THE VEIL OF THE NEARNESS, WHERE THE SYSTEM'S EYE BLURS...

The Stranger gazes intently upon you...

“Uva,” Shiv said. “This book is beyond creepy.”

She hummed. “But it will be useful. I'll keep an eye on it. And make sure it doesn't do anything horrible.”

“Like eat my mind?”

“Like that.”

“Hopefully it just kills me instead if it's an evil book.”

“Shiv...”

Equipment Obtained: [Tome of the Eldest Mysteries]

Tier: [HIDDEN]

Condition: [HIDDEN]

Composition: [HIDDEN]

Enchantments > [HIDDEN]; [HIDDEN]; [HIDDEN]; [HIDDEN]; [HIDDEN]; [HIDDEN]

“The hell is this thing?” Shiv muttered as he threw the book into his cloak.

"And once you're done," Adam said, interrupting Shiv and Uva, "get to the top and bring the tower down. I fear that, and I can't believe I'm saying this, the Gate Lord might need our assistance soon. The remaining warriors under Confriga have been torn apart and eaten by the First Blood. He's fighting alone against over fifty Master-Tier vampires, and True Masters at that. And there are still more coming. I got the non-combatants in the building out. You're clear to drop the tower. Rip away, monster."

Shiv left the vault and put the strange book out of his mind. There was one final thing to do. He shot all the way upward, blasting through every remaining floor and inflicting as much damage as he could. He impacted the ceiling and reached out with his field. He seized the base of the obsidian tower descending from the ceiling and pulled.

Shiv roared. He exerted himself, using all his effort. And he relished in the one thing the other two couldn't do all that well. Bend things, break things, tear things asunder. The base groaned as it began to buckle. The magically-enhanced obsidian cracked. Metal bolts and structural joints bent and burst apart. But it wasn't going fast enough. Shiv felt a surge of annoyance as he poured anger into his Gravitic Wrestler. And suddenly, his strength spiked. He triggered his Icon of the Paindrinker as well. And the effects of his damage were magnified. The base was ripped asunder in an explosive shattering. The top of the tower broke off and the rest plunged.

Shiv hovered in place, letting out a casual huff, his muscles throbbing but otherwise fine. But he managed it. He managed to rip the base apart and bring the entire tower down. And he watched it, with a building sense of satisfaction in his chest, crash against the third gateway—and lodge itself deep as the middle of the tower folded inward.

Shiv let out a breath, and for a moment, the other two were speechless.

"Shiv," Adam said, with a slight hint of apprehension in his voice. "When next we spar, I'm going to do everything in my power to stay far, far away from you."

"Yeah," Shiv said, "and I'm going to do everything I can to grab you, and pull off your helmet, and maybe give you a haircut."

"You will not," Adam said.

"Maybe I will," Shiv said.

"Boys," Uva said, "focus. Confriga."

"All right. Well, it's your lucky day, Young Asshole. Let's go save the only asshole here bigger than you."

"Well, you first, bastard. You're the only one he really knows, after all. And keep your Silhouette up. No showboating. We approach and keep him alive, but spent. Then, we all hit him together after the First Blood is defeated, and we get our new Master-Tier Skill."

"Sure," Shiv said, "I always keep my Silhouette up."

"You showed the bloody Heroic-Tier vampire you were fighting your face at the end."

"Yeah, but I was about to win."

"Yes, but he wasn't dead."

"He got there when I stabbed him in the heart-balls, didn't he?"

"Just piss off and start doing horrible things to the combatants at the gateway. I'll go fetch Valor and get him ready. Uva. Leu. Get that mana core Synchronized. Let's finish this."

"Affirmative," Uva said.

With a pull of Shiv's gravitic field, he shot towards the Abyssal Gateway, where Lesser Marshal Confriga struggled desperately against the last dregs of the First Blood.

His heart thundered with anticipation. Coming for you, Gate Lord.

Chapter 83 (I) Fall [II]

There are beings, dare I even call them gods, beyond the purview of the System, existing only in the periphery of the Grand Integration. These beings have been touched by mana, but they have not fully been subsumed yet. For whatever reason, the System was never truly able to claim them. Perhaps their original nature was already too deviant. Or maybe our assumptions are incorrect, and this is a deliberate maneuver on the part of the System to create an entire separate category of rule twisting, skill-bending, soul-twisting creatures to act as...

Predators. Predators for Pathbearers.

Though many of these creatures are not of the same race or even functional nature, they all fall within the realm of utmost deviance and unnatural existence. As such, these beings have all been gifted the moniker of eldritch.

Eldritch beings are hard to describe, yet easy to identify. Due to the sheer variety of eldritch beings, all of them interface with the Integrated Multiverse in inimical ways, such as ripping through the fabric of space and damaging spatial magic itself, contaminating mana and leaving it poisonous for a mage, or perhaps even becoming akin to a virus: a virus that turns an individual's skills against them and corrupts a soul from within.

These are the most dangerous of all eldritch beings, Soul Parasites that possess your skills and turn them against you from within.

Whatever the case, should you encounter an eldritch being, the best thing to do is to avoid it and flee at all costs. They can be slain, they can be beaten, but it's not worth it. It is never worth it, and no matter what you do, no matter what happens, do not let them notice you.

Do not draw the eyes of their eldest gods.

And pray that you never gain the interest of the Stranger.

-Face of the Stranger: Eldritch Beings at the System's Periphery

"Good godsdamn shit, Adam. You weren't lying when you said the situation at the gateway was bad."

The winds ripped around Shiv as he flung himself closer to the Abyssal Gateway. Confriga's army was completely broken. The last of Confriga's Master-Tiers lay dead or writhing atop mountains of corpses. Comparatively, Shiv could barely sort the remains of the rest of Confriga's army out from the literal sea of dead Blood Horrors and vampires.

Being outnumbered was an ugly thing.

Being unnecessarily outnumbered because the Gate Lord was too much of an arrogant asshole that wouldn't stop butchering his own soldiers, didn't request for support from his own homeworld, and generally did nothing but make bad choices after bad choices was just tragic.

Also true to Adam's words, the First Blood was utterly spent. The vampiric army filtered in through the gate as a trickle now, not even a river. More and more of the final remnants of the invasion force limped across—the true reserves. They lacked actual combat experience, judging from how hesitant they were about entering the fray against Confriga directly.

And that was just the thing. Despite his army being dead, Confriga was still fighting—and fighting like a Vulteg possessed. That was one thing Shiv had to give Confriga: The Lesser Marshal was a bastard, and Shiv was going to enjoy killing him, but Confriga was a warrior to the bone; to the bitter end.

Biomancy spells and all sorts of other magic bombarded Confriga, but the Lesser Marshal powered through them as he butchered his way through the vampires. His blurring wings incinerated anyone below High Adept-Tier who dared to approach him outright, and those above fared little better.

He was fighting approximately fifty of them at once while being encircled. Some of them worked to pin him in place with spell after spell, hammering away at his Magical Resistance. Some attacked him

physically. But between his armor, his extraordinary Toughness, and his extremely high Physicality, Confriga never stayed pinned for long. And everyone who came anywhere near him paid a brutal price.

Every time he struck a blow, dozens of vampires would be torn apart and then ignited by the heat of his wings.

But that was just the thing. You could rip a high vampire in half, and the bastard would just get up after a moment. You needed to crush their Lineage Core, and sometimes, vampires learned how to hide their core pretty well too.

But that wasn't the only problem. With Confriga so occupied by the elite of the First Blood, the other vampires and Blood Horrors spilled around him. They sailed through the air, curving past the ruins that were the customs and processing building, planning to overwhelm the rest of Gate Theborn.

Shiv realized if they did get in and sank their teeth into the vulnerable population, they would be dealing with more Blood Horrors, and an even larger, lesser vampire outbreak. There was no way they would be able to hold the gate after that anyway.

"Don't worry about the chaff," Adam said. "I'll deal with them. You go after the hard targets."

"Alright," Shiv said.

"When we're finished setting up Guardshead Leu as the next Gate Lord, she'll come in with the mana core and unleash all its frost magic on Confriga. Then, we'll break him down with precision and focus. But we won't be able to do that if the entire gate falls."

"Yeah," Shiv growled. "I can't believe we're covering his ass."

"If only so we can stab it ourselves later," Adam replied, and that statement immediately brightened Shiv's mood.

Shiv accelerated in the air, Silhouette active, with the winds cracking around him. He smashed through the sound barrier and began to pound his fists together, his Momentum Core climbing. Then Adam's arrows descended—hundreds of them, with hundreds more every passing half second. The Young Lord's clones spread across the sky, their bodies left in shadow by the dormant mana core. The rapier, Adam's Spellstring, his vambrace, and his new skills made him utterly overwhelming.

The insidious thing about the Veilpiercers was that they didn't truly travel through physical reality. No, they, like their name suggested, tore across dimensions, and Adam just didn't miss—even before his Skill Evolution. The weaker Blood Horrors were blown apart immediately; their cores pierced through, their bodies detonating into thick, bloody mist.

Stronger enemies got buried with Necromancy arrows. They howled, and that was only made worse as Adam unleashed a series of other magic spells using the power of the Spellstring. Mostly he struck at their minds, stunning them, and that quickly proved to be fatal.

Shiv slammed into the invaders from a low angle. Anything that wasn't ready for him simply disintegrated. He was moving too fast, and his gravitic field let him pulp whatever he touched. The Blood Horrors burst against him like flies splattering beneath a swatter. Some vampires held a little longer, but these weren't Master-Tier, just Adepts sent in to take the rest of the gate while Confriga was pinned.

They were all considerably weaker than the vampires he faced within the teleportation anchor as well. But once again, they were vampires, and so without crushing the core or destroying them some other way, they could continue regenerating and fighting. So Shiv did something both brutal and practical.

He didn't go core hunting over and over again. He simply crushed their entire bodies into small chunks of mangled meat. The wet noise of pulping flesh followed, ending only when Shiv felt the pop of a Lineage Core.

Shiv conserved his Biomancy and let it recover some more. Can Hu joined in on the action as he unleashed blasts of small, pebble-sized steel balls that shredded the weaker of the Adepts. And soon they dropped as Adam left them utterly pulverized under another stream of arrows.

Through it all, not a single Veilpiercer even came close to glancing at Shiv. It was a testament to the Young Lord's skill, but also an active relief. For most people, firing in the chaos meant risking hitting their own front-liner. For Adam, it was just a slight adjustment to his aim.

The Deathless and the Archer pushed harder with each other's momentum. Shiv smashed, shattered, and terrified, breaking the cohesion of the swarm. Adam pierced, slaughtered, and blinded, crippling anyone who dared try to flee. In less than three minutes, about four hundred flanking Adepts and Blood Horrors were rendered into pieces and splattered remains.

Harkness really was just playing with us, Shiv realized. He thought back to his fight against the owl in Passage and grimaced. We're damn lucky she was the way she was. Of course, she came out of that harder and stronger than ever...

Then, another vampiric wave came, but that didn't matter. More were dying, dying under Adam's arrows, dying as Shiv charged into them. And for a brief moment in the heat of combat, Shiv felt a strange sense of discomfort.

Not so long ago, he wouldn't have been able to contend with even one Blood Horror. They would have seemed too fast, impossibly strong, and unkillable without a substantial advantage or copious amounts of fire. Now it felt like he was stepping on insects over and over again. And that made Shiv realize another thing about being a Pathbearer. It inherently alienated you from those weaker than you. You forgot what it was like to starve, to hurt truly, to be crippled and broken. You forgot a lot of things about weakness, until it was taught back to you by a stronger, more advanced adversary.

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The slaughter of the flanking Blood Horrors and vampires proved to be a rehearsal. When they were all finally butchered, Shiv found himself standing atop the rubble that was the customs and processing building. He still wasn't sure how it got knocked over. And then he recalled that Uva slammed the Shoggoth into Confriga's army.

Just when he thought he couldn't adore that woman more...

He looked upon the Abyssal Gateway, and by this point, it wasn't even a trickle anymore. Just dots were coming through. Dots who were vampires, horrors, monsters, individual golems—anything they could throw at Confriga, anything. The two armies had worn each other down to the nubs, and Shiv's team had done catastrophic damage to both of their cohesions.

Below, at the very bottom of the city, Shiv couldn't even see the molten rivers anymore. They had been completely covered by the dead. It was an endless carpet of red. Rivulets of viscera ran from mountains of bodies, descending as waterfalls. Some smoldering mounds of burning corpses added points of differentiation amidst all the slaughter, but ultimately made no difference. If Shiv had to guess, he thought that almost five thousand vampires and monsters were lying there.

"Four thousand and two hundred, more like," Adam muttered.

Shiv let out a breath. Killing enemies up close made sense but this many dead... It felt surreal. "So many dead in, what, just over an hour of fighting?"

Uva interjected, then, her mind mostly occupied by other things. "The First Blood cares little for their chaff. It is not uncommon for their dead to reach numbers well past fifty million, even in minor engagements."

"Minor engagements?" Adam cried. "Fifty million..." Then he trailed off. "Come to think of it, I don't think I know the exact number of how large the Republic's military is. It can't be fifty million... Can it? Blackedge is only barely fifty thousand in terms of population."

"I'm beginning to feel like there's a reason for that," Shiv said. He had a growing hint of suspicion. That Roland Arrow did a lot of things for hidden reasons. Considering how dangerous the Abyss was, how powerful each of the Five Faiths was, and how Roland Arrow personally invaded the Abyss and managed to drive many of the Five Faiths back during his campaign, Shiv couldn't imagine the surface to be weak. It just wasn't possible. In fact, he suspected the Republic was a lot stronger than he or Adam knew.

No, that was a facade, or at least a masquerade against its own people as well, and his thoughts flowed over to Adam, even though the Young Lord was more willing to give his father the benefit of the doubt.

A loud, deafening roar was followed by a massive shockwave. A torrent of force slammed into Shiv, and he pushed back with his gravitic field. Even so, he had to exert a bit of effort to remain in place.

As debris and ash flowed over him, the space cleared, and Shiv could see Lesser Marshal Confriga's petal-like wings spread wide. He was surrounded from all sides, and Biomancy spells crashed against him over and over, but they didn't seem to stun Confriga at all, rather just enraging him further.

He moved fast, almost too fast for Shiv to track. He struck one of the Master-Tier vampires, and a channel of force exploded through them. The top side of their body disintegrated, but before he could snatch the core, another Master-Tier vampire slammed into him, this one completely shifted into their combat form. The attacking Master resembled a mass of lashing tendrils shaped from glistening tendons and mouths ridged with bloody fangs, and they gripped down on the Lesser Marshal's armored body, biting over and over.

Confriga tried punching this one as well, but rather than being splattered by the channel, they simply split their body apart and glided around Confriga's form. Suddenly, the vampire became as if a biological iron maiden. Even from so far away, Shiv could feel what the vampire was doing. It was creating ridges of bladed tissue within where Confriga was, trying to grind him apart. And as Confriga flexed, letting out another roar as a shockwave exploded out from him, the shapeshifting vampire simply spread wide, becoming as if a parachute and letting itself be carried away rather than suffering any true damage.

But there was a strategy to this distraction as well. The shapeshifter left just in time for another massive artillery barrage of Biomancy spells to crash over Confriga. This time, the Gate Lord did yell as a series of crimson explosions swelled wide, so wide that they swept even over Shiv, over a good tenth of the entire gate.

"They're going to bombard Confriga until his Magical Resistance breaks, and then they're going to pull him apart with casual effort," Uva muttered.

As Shiv took in the combat, he realized that was ultimately the problem with fighting an army. If they could pin you with their front line, it didn't matter if you were a Hero or even a Legend. After enough hits to your Magical Resistance, your soul would crack open, and it would allow someone else to reach into you. After that, well, magic was a treacherous foe. Tsunamis shaped from horrible cancerous tides crashed down upon Confriga, and he split them in half with swiping cuts from Absence.

Confriga wielded the blade with ferocity and skill. But more than just that, true to Uva's words, there was something about the long, thin weapon that made Shiv wary, that told Shiv something was hiding in its deeper darkness. His cuts seemed to make reality writhe in some way, made the world around its edge shake and quiver.

"Come then!" Confriga roared, "Come, and I will show you how I earned my title as Lesser Marshal!" His wings turned as he twisted on his heel and spun in place. The burning petals suddenly stretched, becoming over a hundred meters long each, and the Lesser Marshal unleashed a fiery tornado upon the gate. It completely pulverized all remaining High-Adept vampires, and even the Master-Tiers ignited and they screamed, buying him a momentary opening—an opening that didn't last long enough for Confriga to do anything. Coiling surges of blood swept over his wings and then crystallized in an instant. A few hundred wound golems flew overhead, and they immediately began extending their grotesque forms, developing new wounds as they cast spell after spell upon Confriga from above. The Gate Lord shouted as he was impacted over and over again, mana detonating against him.

And for the first time, Confriga fell to one knee. But only ever so briefly.

"Kind of enjoying the show, to be honest," Shiv said.

"Yes, well, as much as this miserable bastard deserves this, if he falls, we'll be the ones fighting all the damn vampires." So Adam let out a breath. He spent a few moments considering the task at hand. "Let's say we take a quick stroll out beyond the gate. We slaughter their backline. We cripple whoever they have left. I think Confriga still has some fight in him. He'll be able to stalemate these Master-Tiers for a while longer."

"I will keep an eye on him as well," Uva said, her strands slithering forth, moving carefully and slowly, trying to avoid being noticed. "I will strike at the Master-Tier vampires starting now. If they gain too much of an advantage, I will stun them, and I will give Confriga his opening. He should be able to kill

quite a few of them, even if he does fall. But also..." She paused briefly. "There's still something about his sword. I can... hear something from inside it."

"Is it like the book?" Shiv asked, wary about what was in his cloak.

"Yes. Exactly, even."

"Uva, I'm still having doubts about that. The sword and the book feel wrong somehow."

She gave a vague hum. "We don't have the luxury of being totally fine without knowing what our enemy can do."

Shiv grunted in return. He didn't really have anything good to say about that, even if he felt Uva might be a little too blasé about all this. Besides, who was he to talk to? He was learning most of his Biomancy from the mental imprint of a cruel, mad artist of a vampire lodged in a near-universally banned book.

"Alright," Adam said, "here's what we're going to do. I'm going to fire an arrow into their backline mages to give Confriga a bit more breathing room. And then we're going to cross through. I took a peek with my Seer of Horizons. So far, it doesn't look like they have too much left to muster against the gate, perhaps a thousand units or so. But I can't quite judge their Tiers. So we'll need to be cautious. Also, I'll see if I can find any traces of Ikki and the others."

"Thank you," Uva said, grateful that Adam was still thinking about her team.

"Don't worry, Uva," Adam replied. "I'm quite sure that Still Water and all the others would have probably retreated rather than stayed in this miserable mire of a situation. But there's still the matter of why they couldn't communicate with us..."

The Young Lord landed beside Shiv, his own wings going dim. He had a Veilpiercer nocked, and he looked to the Deathless. "You ready, monster? I'm going to open the way for you first."

"Just fire your shot, hawk—Oh, wait, before that. Give me one second."

Adam frowned as he let his bow go slack.

Shiv pulled a few things out of his cloak. He'd been thinking about this for a while, about improving his own strategies and enhancing his combat capabilities. He had power now, he had speed, he had concealment and durability. His magic still needed quite a bit of work, but the reason he prevailed against so many adversaries, and strange adversaries as that, was one thing: surprise, an instinctive cunning that had guided his hand so long, and once more, he let it guide him.

He was missing something for the mid-range when his Biomancy was spent. His Woundeaters had a limitation, and that was his magical field. And past a certain point, he wasn't so accurate with his bone drills either. So he needed something that could extend, something he could cast out and keep extending forward onto the horizon, or reel back at any time he wanted. Something he could use as a weapon that didn't constantly strain his mana.

And so, between his Biomancy and his gravitic field, Shiv came up with a new and enticing idea. A new, enticing, and potentially flexible instrument.

"Shiv," Adam said, his eyes narrowing as the Deathless began to draw out his old bodies and extract their spinal cords. "What are you bloody doing? Why are you mutilating your own corpses right now? Now is not the time."

"Now is the perfect time," Shiv said. And as he extracted the spinal cords and fused them end to end, he drew sections of biomass along the construct's length, lining the interior and the upper side of the extended cords with tendons.

Adam's jaw dropped a little at the casual violence.

"Shiv," Uva said, sounding confused. "What exactly are you doing?"

And then Shiv performed the part he was looking forward to. He gathered two of his reserve adamantium armors along with other bits of hardened tissue at the very head of all the spines and tendons he was weaving together. And then he bade the biological material to regenerate, and regenerate it did. A clump of metallic cancers began to spread all along its length, and Shiv fashioned the edges to be jagged and blunt in random places for variety.

Finally, he wrapped the end of the weapon around his left arm, and he tested his new creation.

He jerked it back in a looping arc and used his gravitic field to guide the mass of bone and cancers. As it sailed through the air, he used his Biomancy to further refine it, to adjust its shape and increase its aerodynamic nature. With his fields, he wielded the flail as if it were an extension of himself. He swung it backward, and since it bore the collective mass of several adamantine bodies, it came crashing down approximately a hundred meters away, sending dirt and debris high up into the air.

Then, with a casual tug, Shiv flicked the makeshift flail back toward himself as he wrapped both spine and tendon around his arm. He performed his final flourish, allowing it to vanish back into his cloak without even catching it. It disappeared into the dimensional opening, but part of it remained connected to Shiv's arm. This made it a concealable weapon as well.

The Deathless laughed. "Those bastards aren't going to see this one coming."

Chapter 83 (II) Fall [II]

Both Uva and Adam were utterly speechless. "I... I..." Adam let out a moan of incredulity and disgust. "That's just grotesque, Shiv."

"But it's effective," Shiv said. "Also, it builds my Dread Aura."

"Is that going to be your excuse for all of this?"

"It's not an excuse. It's leveling."

"Sometimes, dear brute..." Uva said, though not nearly as severe as Adam. "I worry about you."

"Don't worry, Uva. This will just make me more effective."

"And that is the primary reason why I'm just not going to question it anymore. That, and well, it frankly isn't that much more cruel than my Psychomancy. I do jump into minds and make people murder their friends."

"I kind of like that too," Shiv said.

"Thank you," Uva replied with a low growl in her voice.

Adam shook his head. "You two deserve each other."

"Alright, Adam," Shiv said, tugging on his new weapon. "Open up the rift. Let's go say hi to these bastards. And show them my new cancer flail."

"Please don't call it that," the Young Lord muttered, and he fired his arrow. It shot and tore through dimensions. And as it struck, Shiv saw the insides of a vampire mage burst open on the other side, and the impact was hard enough that several others aside from him were flung off their feet.

"Looks like it hit pretty hard," Shiv said, complimenting Adam before patting the Young Lord on the back.

Adam grunted from the impact, but didn't fall over. "Distance is damage," Adam repeated. "After you, you psychotic mess of a man. Go show them the nightmare you just made." And despite everything, there was a hint of mirth in Adam's voice as well.

Shiv chuckled. "I knew you would learn to like it."

"It's either that or learning to hate it."

Shiv shot across, and as he did, he spun in the air, launching the cancer flail out from his cloak and letting it blast forward through the air. He realized it was going to be a little short, and then immediately started adding a bit more biomass to it—mainly tendons and other tissues for length. Another cool thing about the cancer flail—modularity. It didn't need that much Biomancy to work, either. He could keep this up indefinitely.

The other vampires magi gathered and prepared to respond to the sudden attack. One of their members finally noticed the dimensional rift and pointed into it, calling out to the others, only to immediately get turned to bloody paste by Shiv's flail.

It impacted, and a second shockwave tore through the area. And it was then that the furrows in Shiv's brain activated again. You know what? I could cut the cancer flail and then use that as a teleportation anchor. Yeah, I'll do that some time.

As he traveled along, he slammed his fists together, building up some of his Momentum Core. He emerged about a second after his flail, and a third shockwave shook the First Blood backline. With all of their Master-Tiers in the area occupying Confriga's focus, the magi were vulnerable, and Shiv tore into them. He wasn't a hound in a henhouse; he was a wildfire spreading through a village made from nothing but wood.

The vampiric magi tried to fight back, but his kukri slashed out, cutting them, Deepest Edge splitting them from neck to groin. His Conduit of Dawn flared, and he cut out from above, slicing heads and searing faces. Then Shiv pulled with his other arm. He swung hard and wide, and using his gravitic field to guide the path of his flail, it whipped hard and twisted at an unnatural arcing angle.

Whips were not common weapons for most warriors. Shiv suspected that slavers probably developed Whip Proficiency more than anyone else. But when one had perfect tactile control over anything they held, an extended flail connected to an adamantine hard string could go a long, long way.

The head of the cancer flail smashed and smeared several bodies. Armor shattered before its accelerating mass, and the cord of tendon and spine connecting it to Shiv himself also did their work, becoming as if a long scythe against most of the vampires. They came apart, their bodies split, their organs burst out from their rupturing flesh, and Shiv laughed as he spun hard in place.

He fed some more length of tendon and spine to his flail using his Biomancy, and his heart leapt with childlike joy. There was a purity to creating something. There was a purity to playing with your work. Shiv found that while true while cooking, it was true in war as well. He was still an aspiring Biomancer when it came to the technical details, but even a student could make a great many things, could make art from the clay they could muster.

As he spun in several arcs, Shiv felt hundreds of magi die in the formation, and hundreds more get flung off their feet or badly maimed in the aftermath. Then at the end, as he saw another group nearby, positioned on the bridge, preparing to blast him with a series of spells, the flail halted unnaturally, seized by Shiv's gravity field, and it exploded straight down. Right into the middle of that formation.

Silhouette > 81

Deepest Edge > 62

Another shockwave consumed the world. Blood, gore, limbs, and more flew everywhere. But Shiv still had his Silhouette active, and with all the chaos, the dust, and the viscera-soaked clouds splashing down, they lost track of him again.

Shiv pulled his flail back into his cloak, and the trace of his presence became little more than just an outline. By this point, however, the Young Lord was in the fray as well. A small tide of Veilpiercers completely devastated the vampire magi backline, eliminating them before Shiv could smash another formation with a flail.

Moreover, the bridge he was standing on—or rather the remnants of it—were coming apart, as were the Biomancy-shaped organic extensions the vampires added to the structure. Adam materialized just beside him. Some of the Young Lord's clones were still firing in the air, and so the crawling, maimed, or crippled vampire magi immediately burst apart, as did several golems under the same fire. A few seconds later, Adam's clones vanished, and the Young Lord looked around at the carnage they wrought.

"Bloody hells," Adam said, gagging.

Shiv laughed. "I wasn't lying about the smell."

And he stared into Shiv's cloak. He stared at the cord connected to Shiv's left arm, looking more disturbed than impressed. "Shiv, when we get back to Blackledge, you cannot do this."

"What?" Shiv said. "Do what?"

"The whole weaponizing your body thing. It might have been fine because we've been tearing apart terrible people this entire time, but if you do this around normal people, they will be deeply, truly traumatized. We're going to disguise that flail."

"No, we're not," Shiv said.

"We are," Adam insisted. "It won't be bad. Maybe just wrap some flowers around it. Clump some earth to make it seem like a Geomancy Skill. Can Hu! Can you help?"

"Yes," Can Hu said. "Though—"

"The cancer flail stays a cancer flail," Shiv said, adamant.

And just then, a series of vampires staggered through the portal, only to collapse dead in front of Shiv, their bodies badly burned. It was then that he noticed Uva's mana strands sinking through the gateway, and the Umbral shook her head. "So. The gateway. Eliminating the vampiric backline. How is that going?"

"Sorry, Uva," Shiv said as he patted Adam on the arm. "The Young Lord here got consumed by his urge to admire my large flail."

The Umbral reacted with a note of disgust. "You two are such children sometimes."

"It's not that large," Adam muttered.

"True, Adam. The thing is, I can make it bigger. Can you make your Veilpiercers bigger?"

The Young Lord sneered. "Eat shit and die."

"There we go." Shiv patted Adam on the back. The Young Lord stuck a particular finger in his face.

Adam reached out with a hand and channeled his dimensionality. Shadowy mana crashed into the gate and he focused. "What are you doing?" Shiv asked.

"I'm making sure that it's accessible from this side and not the other anymore," Adam replied. "And I'll be able to come back through. These vampires will be stuck out. Whatever frequency they were using before was the same as the one we used to get in. I'm simply blowing out the easy access points, so to speak."

Shiv nodded. He didn't know much about spatial magic or dimensionality. And so he let Adam do his thing. Meanwhile, Shiv walked forward. "See you in a minute then. I'm going to go show some more people my new flail first."

"Not too long at all," Adam said. "Have fun."

"Fully intend to, Young Lord."

He emerged through the gateway and saw that the landscape was, as Adam described, disfigured and absolutely vile. A mass downpour of blood and cancerous pieces of flesh were raining down. Enormous growths of misshapen tissue lined with eyes and jagged teeth rose over the horizon, occupying the space where the guard towers used to.

And speaking of the guards, a series of long pikes were arranged around the gateway. And on it were practically every wyvern rider the vampires could leave intact after their feeding frenzy. Well, mostly intact. Several of the wyvern riders were missing multiple limbs as well. And some had no heads, or had their heads dangling from their body, and various other delightful assortments. On Shiv's side, there was the tasteful creation of his cancer flail, which was purely meant to intimidate and to enhance his combat capabilities. And then there was this, a pointless grotesque display that was absolutely unnecessary.

As he stood there, he saw a few hundred Blood Horrors momentarily pause. They looked towards where he was, but they couldn't fully spot him. His Silhouette was active. And then the vampires felt him thereafter. But they were confused as well. For all they knew, there was a Master-Tier Biomancer among them, emerging from the gate. And more likely than not, that was one of theirs.

Unfortunately for them, Shiv was the “not” portion of probability. He counted enemies everywhere, and his attention fell on a group of Jump Mages trying to create a massive spatial sphere. They were trying to teleport another formation right in front of the gate. Reinforcements. No. Can't have that.

He targeted them first. He shot towards them, slamming his fists together over and over as his Momentum Core built. But as he did that, he thrust his flail out, twisting to his side, and using both hands to grip the spinal length. He brought the flail down like a meteor hammer, and it struck the Jump Mages with an absolutely colossal impact. What followed wasn't merely a shockwave, but an explosion of force. The spatial portal broke, popping without bringing anyone over. The Jump Mages were little more than bloodied smears or bits of tissue lodged in a deep crater. Some of them were still regenerating, though.

Damn vampires.

With a snarl, Shiv swung his cancer flail to the left, and then to the right again. He swatted multiple adversaries off their feet, and he sensed something coming down towards him, a wound golem reaching out. He fired three bone drills into its body, stunning it momentarily before he himself crashed into it.

Another benefit of having Gravitic Wrestler: he could move everything he touched in the same direction. And so there was no awkward jerking with the flail. He simply guided its movement and had it enhance his vector. He obliterated the wound golem against his body, and he swung the flail down, using that to pull him along. As he did, he channeled Conduit of Dawn, slashing at everything he could see. And all the while, his silhouette climbed, and he gained a new skill during the carnage.

Skill Gained: Whip Proficiency (Initiate)

Whip Proficiency > 1

He got a picture of what the scene looked like from the perspective of the vampires as Uva filtered some of her memories over to him. She was piloting what was a particularly large and horrible-looking Blood Horror. She was staggering through the back line and jumping from body to body, compromising and breaking the minds of their most powerful assets.

As such, there was disarray unfolding through the vampire army. In fact, many of the commander vampires were twitching on the ground due to sudden mental breakdowns suffered because of unknown reasons.

But few noticed them, as they were trying to figure out what was attacking them. Shiv's movements were erratic, and all they could see was a strange length of cord followed by a massive clump of bone and cancerous tissue. Every time it landed, something exploded. People died. Then it snaked through the air, twisting unnaturally as if it was a living thing itself, and so the vampire started targeting the flail instead of Shiv, their confusion feeding into his Stealth.

Could he even call it Stealth anymore? It was mostly just Concealment and confusion. They generally knew where he was, but unfortunately, generally wasn't exactly, and in combat, you needed to be exact.

Across his mental link, he could hear her chuckling darkly. "They don't even know where you are. I can't believe it, it is genuinely effective."

And Shiv was on the verge of roaring with laughter himself. Then Adam stepped through the portal, along with a small army of clones. They took to the air, their wings burning hot, their bows singing as lightning, fire, ice, wind, and more accompanied their Veilpiercers. Then in certain cases, corrosion. A creeping barrage of dimensional arrows crashed along the land, and from behind came Shiv, sweeping his flail from side to side, clearing the chaff with every sweep of his new weapon.

Then Can Hu called out, "Shiv, behind us, something has breached my—"

Shiv swung his kukri back on instinct. A vampire emerged seemingly from thin air, the shadows breaking over its body as it came for Shiv. It caught a slash across its neck, but to Shiv's surprise, it wasn't beheaded, rather it merely staggered back, momentarily stunned. Master-Tier Toughness at least. Shiv drove a headbutt into its body, and he pulled his flail back toward him. It exploded across space, liquefying another dozen or so unfortunate foes that managed to survive the initial sweep.

Shiv dodged his own flail, then, and that smashed into the chest of the vampire. Before they could go flying off to the distance, Shiv seized the vampire with his Gravitic Wrestler and powerbombed them

into the ground, stabbed them twice, and then wrapped his flail cord around their neck. He swung them about with the cancer flail, bashing them against the air over and over.

Whip Proficiency > 4

Gravitic Wrestler > 121

But the vampire was tough. He felt the hardness of their body as they were stunned more than hurt, something comparable even to the scab armored vampire, Kraid.

Instead of struggling against him, their limbs shifted into blood, and he felt their mana field twist into strange shapes around him. He cast a laceration into their body, briefly stunning them as the spell exploded against their Magical Resistance. In response, their body remained half liquid shifted, and their transformation wasn't complete. This gave Shiv another opening. He lashed out with his feeble Psychomancy and his kukri. The blade flared with light, and it briefly blinded the vampire. It cried out, and Magical Resistance launched him out.

Yet before he could do anything else, a few hundred mana strands woven into spells speared through the vampire's mind, and it shattered before Shiv. They cried out as Uva bound herself to the vampire, wearing its body and finishing its transformation into a thing of flowing blood. It slipped out from his flail and drifted beside Shiv, full compliant—a new body for Uva.

"So how's that feel, wearing a vampire?"

"Like I'm wearing vermin," Uva replied with disgust in her voice. Faintly, he could hear the vampire screaming, and then she broke something in its mind. It offered little more than whimpers after that.

There they were, standing before the battered remnants of the First Blood, but there were still a few hundred of them. And from between the Blood Horrors, he heard, "Assemble! Gather! Muster yourselves!."

And then came a heavily armored vampire, covered in what seemed to be thick layers of skin. Shiv narrowed his eyes. The armor resembled a great many flayed faces, and they were still moaning, still screaming. The vampire was joined by seven others, and Shiv had the feeling they were all Master-Tier, at least.

Just then a whisper came from within.

Rose muttered to him, and Outside Context Problem triggered as a screen formed in his eyes.

Outside Context Problem: The Skinthief stands before us. He was a disciple of Ekkihurst, and he, more than any other, covets the glory planned for this operation. He cannot allow this to fail, for to return in defeat and disgrace after promising the ancient elders a gate of Compact and a pathway to the surface toward even greater rewards would see him worse than dead; disgraced, shamed and stripped of the title of elder.

He knows not that Kraid, his cousin, is dead. He knows not that things are going so poorly deep within the gate. He cannot believe it. He refused to hear the reports, but now, as he stares at the bloodied, mangled remnants of his rear line, he has to take point now himself, and an unease fills him.

The screen faded, and Shiv's spirit roused for the coming battle.

"Oh, look, Shiv," Adam said, landing beside the rest of his team, "another terrible, vile monster who stole from your fashion sense."

"Hey, the skin decoy was your idea, asshole. You encouraged me."

Adam let out an uncomfortable snort. "Yes, well, you could have said no. And Uva should have rejected this."

"Me?" Uva replied. "Are you blaming this on me?"

Adam nodded without shame. "Yes, you're the sensible one."

She scoffed but said no more.

Shiv eyed the eight vampires and licked his lips. "Adam. Are you still interested in that wager?"

"What, who could kill more bastards?" The Young Lord nocked an arrow.

"Yes, these seem like proper prey, don't they?"

"Yeah," Adam said. "They do, don't they? I'm going for the big one. You two stay away from him."

"He's mine," Uva said.

"Mine first," Shiv said.

"Both of you eat shit," Adam sneered.

Before the Skinthief could start a dialogue, he immediately found himself impacted by a cancerous flail, struck by dimensional arrows, and stabbed with Psychomancy strands.

Nothing was more bonding than competitive violence. Shiv laughed internally.

Chapter 84 (I) Fall [III]

Elite does not mean invincible. Elite does not mean invincible. I will not repeat this a third time, because you should understand it by now.

I don't care that you're already an Adept, Mr. Arrow. I don't care who your father is. I don't care how good you are with that bow. I don't care how fast you can fly with those wings. I don't care how tactically aware you are at all times. You lost this engagement because you flew into a nest of enemies. Enemies that you thought would be so awed and overwhelmed by your power that they would just kneel down and give up.

That's not how war works, Arrow.

We are Pathbearers. We know our enemies could be of a higher tier. We know that some fights might be hopeless. We know all these things. And most people have some kind of mental preparation for them. More importantly, this was a training exercise, so your fellow trainees knew you couldn't kill them. And that meant they could fight to the functional death. And on the battlefield, they would fight even harder to the functional death because if they turned around, that's an arrow to the back. And if they turned around, that's leaving their friends to die.

And let me tell you, death might just be nothing. But life after that kind of shame is hell.

But good job. You defeated most of them. They barely got you with that Psychomancy spell at the end. Lisa's still alive. Tennyson's still alive. That being said, they brought you down, and while you beat twenty people, the other two hundred of them smashed into your faction and won the FUCKING WAR!

Trading twenty or so Pathless or Initiates to bring down an Adept, that's pretty good. That's an incredible trade. If I could trade five hundred Adepts to bring down a Master, I would be laughing and crying at the same time because I love my Pathbearers. But I'd be laughing because the trade is so good.

You want to know how many people an Adept can beat if they're just Initiates? If it was just a series of duels? Well, in most circumstances, infinite. You want to know how many Adepts a Master technically could beat fighting one-on-one? Infinite. And a Hero and a Legend and whatever else that follows after, once our world gets a little bit more mana, follows the same logic.

You are not giving me infinite, Adam. In fact, you are not giving me anything near your maximum potential. Right now, you are embarrassing yourself. Right now, you flew ahead of your team and decided that you were going to show off.

You are not going to do this ever again. And more importantly, we are going to do a fun new exercise in class. Everyone, we are going to do something called 'Hunt Adam Arrow.' He is going to try to survive as long as he can. You are all going to try to pound him into submission.

Biomancers, on standby.

Start running, Adam. You wanted to be a solo act. Here's what it feels like.

-Captain Harry Irons, TacStrat 101, Phoenix Academy

Deepest Edge > 63

Momentum Core > 91

Striking Proficiency > 37

Dodge > 14

Whip Proficiency > 8

Shiv's cancer flail crashed down into the Skinthief's remains just as Adam shot him and Uva drove her shield into the vampire's skull. By this point, the high vampire was truly dead. Beyond dead. More smear than alive. Brutalized beyond measure. Yet, the three keep bashing away just to be sure, and also to claim credit for the kill.

The surroundings around the Abyssal Gateway could only be described as apocalyptic as well. The heavy blood rain stopped after Adam bombarded all the vampire Biomancers' formations with enough Pyromancy and Necromancy arrows that entire kilometers leading away from the entrance to Gate Theborn now resembled rows of steadily progressing craters. A good stretch of the ebony road leading to the archway was also ripped out from the ground by Shiv. He used it to impale a hundred-meter-tall Teeth Giant, leaving the massive beast pinned to the ground while he focused on getting back into the fight.

It finally died after Shiv's cancer flail got stuck inside its body, and he ended up using it as a hundred-meter-long club to splatter two Master-Tier vampires and the small army of dimensionals they summoned.

Incoherent wailing sang forth from what few patches of the nearby woods weren't currently ablaze. Most of the First Blood scouts and Enamel Snipers didn't make it far before their minds were ground down to broken shells. The stronger ones staggered through the woods, sobbing, drooling. They gradually marched into the flames to end their own mental torment. The weaker ones just screamed and screamed.

With a final swing of the cancer flail, the Skinthief burst apart and redecorated Shiv's weapon. And as the dirt and debris stopped falling, the only three Pathbearers still alive on the horrific battlefield worked to catch their breath as they stared at each other.

"I think..." Shiv coughed, and he bit by a groan of pain. The left side of his body felt like hell. "I think I got him first."

"Lying... bastard," Adam wheezed.

Uva narrowed her eyes. "My shield clearly burst his heart first. I can show you two the memory."

"It's true!" her shield cried out. "I felt him. I felt his heart pop! It was... Aw, I feel sick, but I don't have a mouth." Uva stared at the Mind-Shattered Sentinel. "AH! I mean, I love killing people. Nothing gets me more excited than killing people against my will. I love ramming my edges into hearts and popping them. It pleases me. Spiritually. S-sexually?"

And now the Umbral Psychomancer and the others all frowned at the shield.

"J-just spiritually, then." The shield sighed. "I don't know what you monsters want. I'm just trying to protect myself from more trauma. Great One, help me..."

"But as I have a witness," Uva began. "I think this is mine."

"You know there is a course," Adam spat, eyeing Uva with disdain. "A course I took back in the capital on Psychomancers and their deceitful ways. It was called Bullshit-101, and I'm calling it right now."

"It's your memories against mine," Uva said. "And your memories are questionable. I am the only one with an enhanced mind here."

"I have Psychomancy too," Shiv muttered, slightly offended.

Uva reached out and patted his chest. "Yes. And Hydromancy too. You have many talents. But whose memory is better?" She then gave Shiv a side-eye, placed a hand on her hip, and adjusted her posture. Shiv swallowed as he realized what she was doing and tried to ignore it. He couldn't. "Shiv. Dear. You saw my shield fall first, right? I killed the Bloodspawn. The credit should go to me."

And then she started sending him those memories from a few hours ago. Shiv struggled not to groan. He needed to focus—he had his own stake here, and he couldn't just... Gods, were her eyes also so deep and blue and—

"Uva!" Adam snapped, outraged. "Release his mind! This—it's dishonorable."

"I'm not using Psychomancy to control him," Uva said coolly. "He's just having a natural reaction."

The Deathless was beginning to sweat. "I, uh..."

Adam rolled his eyes so hard he nearly gave himself whiplash. "Godsdammit, Shiv, control yourself. Have you no pride? At least say you killed the bastard. Just say it. Make this a stalemate. Do not betray me! Do not betray yourself."

The words were right there, but Shiv couldn't manage to spit them out. Between Adam's glare and Uva's smouldering expression and Shiv's own wants and— "C-Can Hu," Shiv groaned. "W-what did you see?"

The Penitent made a surprised chime and managed to fake a cough. "I was focused on... freeing the slaves. And I momentarily suffered an optical glitch. That is still ongoing."

"But I can see out of your sensors just fine," Shiv muttered.

"It's on my end," Can Hu said. "It is a localized point domain service failure. It is a very technical issue. I am sorry that I cannot be of assistance."

"Shiv..." Uva whispered across their link. She didn't need to say anything else for him to realize this was a desperate, hopeless struggle.

Comparatively, Adam resorted to the tried and true method of all men everywhere when they realized their brother-in-arms was about to betray them for a woman. "Shiv. Look at me. Look at me. Speak the truth. Say what is right. Do not be your parents right now."

"Are you felling serious?" Shiv hissed. "You're using that on me now?"

"Well, I'm not going to out-bloody-seduce Uva, am I?" Adam said.

"Pitiful," Uva deadpanned. "To give up without even trying. Do seduce Shiv, Adam. Let me see how you might do it."

“And you stop using underhanded methods, you—you mind witch!” Adam glared at Uva. “There is a way to these things. An honor to the act of confirming one’s kills and claiming loot. And that act is being violated right now. Just like you’re abusing your... your wiles against this poor, helpless man.” Adam gestured at Shiv.

Uva studied Adam for a moment and just smirked. It was the expression of someone who knew they had the advantage. “Poor helpless man?” She regarded Shiv again, and Can Hu warned Shiv that frequent body temperature spikes could be related to a hormonal issue, unaware of what was actually happening on the Psychomancy front.

Mercy finally came as Uva’s brooch suddenly sounded with a note of discordant strings. “Uva? Cherished Sister Uva, is that you?”

“Palbon?” Uva said. The post-battle banter broke at the voice of Palbon—Uva’s Pyromancer. “Sister Palbon! Yes, it’s—what is your situation?”

“We needed to extract,” Palbon said. “We couldn’t stay. The First Blood—they came in force and without warning. A few hours ago, a few caravans came in, but the cave biters—their insides were loaded with mana bombs. They went off, and the attack followed. It was more coordinated and effective than any First Blood engagement I’ve ever seen. Their scouts almost discovered our location nearby, and we had to move. We tried to contact you, but we couldn’t get through. It was like they were interfering with our brooch resonances somehow.”

“Aviary,” Uva explained in a word. “They were being assisted by Aviary.”

A growl sounded from her booch. “Is there no limit to how many schemes and spies these light-cursed surfacers—oh, are Exalted Guests Adam and Shiv still with you?”

“We’re not exactly a fan of the bastards either,” Shiv said. “But we did manage to bag ourselves an owl if that makes you feel better.”

“And by we, he means Shiv captured the owl,” Adam said, leaning close to Uva. “And that, Sister Uva, is how a Pathbearer recognizes credit.”

Uva just stared flatly at him. “Ah. Yes. Indeed. Pathbearers are children who cannot let things go. Even after the moment has passed.”

“Exac—that’s not what I was doing!”

Palbon continued. “After the initial attack, the First Blood sent a few groups of infiltrators toward Weave. We were ordered by Still Water to aid in the interception and were drawn away. We returned as fast as we could, but the Bloodspawn had already set up a military installation... Or at least they did. Sister... Did... did just the three of you do all that?”

“Four,” Uva said. “Do not forget the Honored Penitent. I will not have its many great contributions to freeing the slaves and assisting Master Shiv ignored.”

“Of course, Cherished Sister. Offer my apologies.”

“It is well,” Can Hu said, though the machine did sound grateful.

"But still... only four..." Palbon sounded awed. "You were always driven and focused, Cherished Sister. I knew you would make Master someday. But I didn't think you—you honor our city and her Lady Archnae with your prowess."

Uva tried to hide her pride, but Shiv read the pleasure in her eyes. "We also used the forces within the gate to break the bulk of the First Blood army first. We merely slaughtered their unprotected backline."

"Still. A near thousand against four... You won't believe the sounds Sister Ikki made while we monitored the battle."

"Somehow, I think I can imagine," Uva replied. "The local perimeter should be secure. We are going to claim Gate Theborn. The Gate Lord has been Desynchronized, and his replacement can be regarded as an ally." She eyed Shiv, showing her uncertainty, but she pressed on. "Soon, Gate Theborn will be under our control."

"This is... This is tremendous news, Sister," Palbon replied, voice filled with awe. "To strike this deeply into Compact territory and capture one of the gates... The Lords of Law will not be pleased."

"Indeed," Uva agreed with a huff of amusement. "But the Quest isn't done yet."

"Quest?" Palbon asked, surprised. "You got another one? A third? In the span of..."

"Yes," Uva said with a slight sigh.

"Then... you..." Palbon paused. "I must confess my envy, Cherished Sister Uva. To be System-favored and prevail..."

"I fear that being System-favored comes with its own assortment of issues, Palbon."

Palbon laughed. "Well, I think I might like some of those issues."

Uva hesitated. "Perhaps," she said. "But death is a constant companion."

"Isn't it always?" the Pyromancer prompted.

Uva paused as she took in the massacre around her. Truly took it in. She stared at the bloody bits of tissue clinging to the bottom of her shield. "Not like this, Palbon. You drown in death when you are favored. And there is little air besides death." Then, Uva broke free of the moment and continued. "Sister. Gather the others—go back to Weave and tell the ranking members of the Order what is happening. Tell them to send a detachment. We will be able to station a garrison here soon. But make it subtle. We are still officially absent from this gate."

"But Cherished Sister Uva, we can—"

"I know you are here, and I know you are willing to fight with me. To the death if you all must." And Uva's expression turned almost fearful. She looked at the many dead around her again, and she regarded Adam and Shiv. Finally, she gazed upon the Abyssal Gateway, and her face hardened. "Beyond that gate is the final adversary, the former Gate Lord. I will not risk any of you until he is truly dead. You

and the others are brave. I could not ask for better sisters," Uva said, her voice slightly awkward. "But we fight a Hero, and I will not spend your lives in vain. This is no battlefield for just a small team. Go. Get aid. May her song spread."

Palbon paused for a moment. "I understand, Uva. May her song spread. And... do not die."

Uva scoffed. "I don't intend to be the one who dies."

"Affirmative," Palbon added. "Oh, and Sister Ikki wants me to ask you... Never mind."

On the other side, Shiv could hear Ikki loudly moaning his name while pretending to be Uva. Both Shiv and Uva exchanged a look and shook their heads.

"That girl..." Uva sighed. "Come on, let's get back in the gate and finish this. I'll pull on her ears later when she gets here."

Chapter 84 (II) Fall [III]

Shiv watched her expression and tasted a melancholy inside her. She enjoyed taking the gate with Shiv and Adam. But it came as a trade. Being System-favored wasn't just a blessing—it almost meant that those who fought alongside you were in danger. Always in danger. There were risks to being a Sister of the Arachnae Order. But those risks paled before the System actively trying to murder you—and rewarding you, should you survive.

"Alright," Adam said. His eyes flashed with mana one final time, and he clenched his jaw as he looked toward the archway. "No one left here. Aside from the poor bastards Uva left mind-broken, that is." His

stellarite saber and rapier drifted alongside him, held by Hydrokinetic hands. Adam drew a steadying breath as he strode toward their final battle.

"Uva," Adam said, "how long do you estimate it will take for the Guardshead to fully Synchronise with the mana core?"

"I cannot give you an exact time," Uva replied. "Perhaps an hour, perhaps more. A lot of people share that belief. It was a thorough conversion, and in times like these, people want someone to hope for. People want someone to believe in." A grimace crossed her features. "The mass casualties helped. There aren't nearly as many people in Gate Theborn who need to be convinced anymore."

"I'm surprised the Quest is still going," Shiv said.

"That's because some of the Master-Tiers are still alive," Uva explained, her brow furrowing. Some of her mana strands remained within the gate.

"And Confriga?"

"Well, he doesn't look good," Uva grunted. "But right now, I'd actually give him even odds of killing the last one before he collapses."

"Adam, get ready to grab Valor," Shiv ordered. "He'll want in on this. There might not be many pieces of the Lesser Marshal left by the time we're done."

"Right," Adam agreed. "But still, keep your distance and batter him down. His Magical Resistance should be on the verge of breaking. Don't risk yourself. You have two people with you right now."

"I am prepared," Can Hu said. "You cannot break what is already broken."

"Yes, but with enough strikes, he might just get to the rest of you," Adam remarked. "So, no risks. We win. We win cleanly, and we win completely. No trading blood for blood. Not now."

"Fine," Shiv grunted. It didn't feel entirely satisfying, but sometimes the best way to win was to win without even really fighting. Overall, aside from the sudden and unexpected encounter with the Educator, their rampage through Gate Theborn was a major success in Shiv's book.

Adam watched Shiv a little while longer, then turned to Uva. "Uva, while I get Valor, keep an eye on him."

"Of course," Uva said.

"What?" Shiv muttered. "Are you two teaming up on me now?"

Uva briefly patted him on the back. "We're just looking out for you, dear. Both of us."

"I'm not stupidly reckless," Shiv insisted.

Adam and Uva shared a look. The Young Lord threw his head back and laughed. Uva simply snorted.

"I'm not," Shiv repeated.

"I fear you have been outvoted," Can Hu replied.

With a final note of lightness, they entered the gateway, preparing to bring the whole affair to an end.

Just as they crossed over, a shape zipped toward them. Shiv immediately shot in front of Adam and swatted the projectile aside, only for it to splatter against him. The gore-laden remnants of the high vampire splashed down from Shiv's body, and in the sky above, Shiv saw the lingering remnants of the First Blood army locked against Confriga in a bitter struggle.

The Lesser Marshal looked wretched. Blood poured from the edges of his onyx eye. His skin was partially flayed, his armor cracked in multiple places, and all of his wing petals were consumed by teratoma. More importantly, his Magical Resistance was on the verge of shattering. Once, he was iron in a world of wood, but even iron had a breaking point, and Confriga was near his.

But the Master-Tier vampires looked no better. There were only five of them left. Two were no longer in fighting condition, rendered down to sacks of blood and mangled tissue. They lay upon the ruins of the customs and processing building. Uva casually reached out and broke their minds.

In the same instant, Confriga swept his blade through one of the three final surviving vampires with a shout of effort, and the vampire dissolved into nothing but ambient mana before they could as much as scream.

Shiv did a double-take at that, and Uva hissed telepathically, "I told you, that sword is dangerous."

"Bloody hell," Adam said. "Shiv, stay far away from that thing. When we get the Quest rewards, select a ranged skill for your Master-Tier Evolution."

Uva's expression turned severe. "This is why the System gave us Master-Tier Evolutions so freely. It has to do with the sword."

"I'm going to get Valor," Adam declared. "This will only be a few seconds. Do not engage without me, Shiv."

"I won't," Shiv said, slightly annoyed. "Don't worry. I'm not an idiot."

"I know, but you are bloody reckless, and I don't want you to end up dead for good because I wasn't there to watch over you," Adam spat out in a hurry as he finished his Dimensionality spell linking him to their hidden anchor.

Adam snorted. "I'm going to teleport now. You two stay here and just wait."

Adam vanished into his spell. Uva and Shiv remained in place, and she wove herself into his mind to remain hidden using his Silhouette. Confriga hadn't noticed them yet, so consumed with battle lust against the vampires that they were all he knew, all he hated. His swings were rough and erratic, the messy speed of a super-sonic drunkard rather than a seasoned warrior. His first two cuts were easily parried. And when he tried to unleash some of his winged petals' radiant flame, all he managed was a brief flicker before one of the extending petals burst apart into sprays of viscera. Confriga howled as the wing distended and splattered onto the bridge, painting the thousands of dead clustered far below.

The final two surviving vampires were the shapeshifter Shiv had seen earlier and one more, some kind of dedicated spellcaster that specialized in blood-related magics. It hammered Confriga, shaping attacks from its very being, creating blades, arrows, anvils, and more from blood. She struck the former Gate Lord over and over as he tried to attack her, but he was always intercepted by the shapeshifter.

The shapeshifter was the true challenge for Confriga. He adapted to everything Confriga did, flowing around the Lesser Marshal's body, fast enough to keep up with his strikes. The vampire's form constantly shifted, becoming flat, hard, morphing unceasingly, forcing Confriga to always react, to always be burdened with some kind of defense. Paired with how exhausted Confriga was, this fight truly came down to the wire.

A flash of corrosive energy pulsed from the single remaining skull on Confriga's chest. He tried to channel it into a blast, but was interrupted once more by a pendulum of blood crashing into him. The solidified blood magic exploded, and the swell of crimson consumed the area. The Lesser Marshal was launched from his feet. He soared through the air and crashed into a distant plaza, sending smoke and debris high into the air.

Uva and Shiv followed immediately, but remained at a distance so they wouldn't be spotted.

The moment was so enticing for Shiv. He could cut the vampires down from behind and just obliterate Confriga with his flail or magic. Uva was there. Both of them—

“Shiv,” she said, her voice severe. “Adam is right. Do not risk it. We crush him together.”

“He's just godsdamned right there,” Shiv growled, frustrated.

“So is his sword.” A heavy feeling came over her. “I—my Eldritch Insight reacts inside me when I look upon that sword.”

Shiv heeded her words and stayed concealed. As he bobbed through the air, he stared down at the battlefield from above and grimaced. There was nothing but smoke and rubble where Confriga impacted. Both of the vampires limped toward his position, casting spells into the haze—

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

But with a ragged cry, Confriga soared once more, his cancerous body rupturing as he forced himself to speed toward his enemy. His one eye, an onyx orb of absolute hate, wept rivers of blood as he greeted his enemies once more with a roar. "I am Lesser Marshall Confriga! I am a campaigner of a thousand dimensions, a butcher of ten thousand worlds! I will not fail here! I will regain my name! I will regain my honor! And I will regain Lord Scorn's favor!"

The shapeshifter prepared to intercept, expecting Confriga to strike the spellcaster. Yet Confriga did something strange. He cut across his own body with the sword, splitting open a gulf of space. Through the gap came a massive, lashing tentacle of oil-like shadow that sought to claim the shapeshifter. The shifter reacted, coiling around the tentacle, but rather than going after the spellcaster while she was open, Confriga cast his sword out at the shifter after ripping it out from his chest.

For the first time, Absence struck the shapeshifter's body dead on.

A cry sounded. The vampire returned to its original state, a man in fluid, blood-made armor. As he tumbled, the spellcaster cried out for her ally. But Confriga smashed into her with a final, desperate burst of speed and punched her with his three-fingered fist. A hole exploded through her chest—but Confriga kept hitting her until there was nothing left. Meanwhile, the shapeshifter howled as he began to dissolve, and the massive oily tentacle gripped him, pulling his fading form into the gulf of nothingness

it came from. The stationary portal flickered out of existence a second later.

And with that, there were no more Master-Tier vampires remaining. No more invaders. No more anything but Confriga and the people who had sought him dead long before the First Blood did. The once-powerful Gate Lord, a True Hero among Pathbearers, groaned from his many wounds and could barely hold himself up. Absence was the only reason he was still standing. Slowly, he fought himself back to his feet, his legs shivering, his winged petals withered and ruined. "I proclaimed, and I manifested my destiny!" He glared at the mana core. "I AM GATE LORD CONFRIGA! AND THEBORN HAS NOT... not..."

But Confriga couldn't quite finish, as he noticed Shiv, Uva, Adam, and Valor descending to finish him. A second before, a rift had opened, and from it came the Archer and the Legend. They came to a collective halt two hundred meters above and away from Confriga, and the Deathless deactivated his Silhouette.

"You," Confriga growled, rage surging through him, his one eye widening. Suddenly, he didn't seem so weak anymore. He planted his feet and grasped Absence with both hands. "Vile vermin! Was this your doing? Was this your plan? I am not beaten yet! I am not nearly finished! Come! Even broken, I am more than enough to claim your head. Face me. Alone or with your coward companions."

Shiv scoffed. He pulled off his helmet and then lifted Can Hu's half-skull. He regarded Confriga with a sneer—the kind that Adam would do every now and again. "Well, I can't take all the credit. Frankly, most of it goes to you."

"What?" Confriga exclaimed, surprised.

"Yeah, you might be the biggest asshole I've ever met," Shiv continued. "Murdering all your own people, not bothering to listen to a second opinion, not solving any of the actual problems in the gate, taking slaves, running a weaver breeding operation. Frankly, we couldn't have done half this shit without you. Except for the Bowel-Breaker. That was mostly me."

"Silence!" Confriga shouted. "I will not let you insult me!"

He staggered forward, but even with his incredible Physicality, he was beyond spent. A near hundred Master-Tiers fighting a single Hero, while supported by multiple magi formations, golems, and more, had driven Confriga to the brink. He tried launching himself at them but could barely manage a stagger, struggling to stay upright.

Then a loud, long sigh came from Valor. "Really, Adam? You brought me here to show me... this thing?"

"You," Confriga growled and gasped. "Silence. You..." Then he recognized Valor. "T—your right arm... You... You are he..."

"Yes, yes," Valor said. "And you are a third-rate practitioner of a very esteemed art." He regarded the skull on Confriga's chest and made a noise of absolute disgust. "Come then. Show me your Necromancy." Valor looked at the others. "Do not intervene. I have been humiliated and stagnant long enough. I have felt unlike myself for too long. Let me indulge my curiosity. Even as a meager Adept, I can instruct our friend here on a lesson."

Shiv wasn't sure, but Adam just shrugged. "I'll make sure to shoot Confriga in the head if he ever gets close to stabbing Valor," the Young Lord said telepathically.

"What happened to honor and decency and all that?" Shiv muttered.

"Honor and decency end at the point your mentor is about to be killed by some bastard slaver," Adam said.

Valor drifted forward, and Confriga regarded him with as much curiosity as nervousness. "What? What are you doing? You are a Necromancer, The Great Valor Thann. So where are your effigies?"

"You foolish child. The entire world has died so many times over. Why would I need a skull when all of existence is a tomb? Why would I need a skull now, when I am surrounded by death, you rank amateur?"

Valor raised a hand, and Necromantic mana swirled around him, crackling, withering the world as if it were burning the pages of a book. The corrosion of loss warped the space around the ancient. For a moment, Shiv saw who he was again, the man he had once been, and a shiver ran through him, the same shiver countless vampires must have felt when they were fighting him—that he was an insect looking at something beyond even a man.

But then the moment was gone, and Valor was what he was again: a shattered Pathbearer slowly piecing himself back together with the help of his new disciples and allies.

Confriga clenched his teeth, his vertical jaw slamming together, and he drew forth green Necromantic energy from his sole remaining effigy. He launched it forward; a swelling tide of Corrosion that came at Valor—only for it to be seized by the Legendary Pathbearer with a simple gesture.

"What?" Confriga yelled.

Then Valor shaped the Necromantic energy, swirling it about his hand and slowly condensing it into the shape of a short sword. All that loss, all the corrosion, tempered and mastered by someone bearing only Adept-Tier potential, by someone who was only a shadow of who they were.

Shiv let out a laugh. It was frightening in a sense. He was powerful, but there was a lot he didn't know, and Valor demonstrated that without power, knowledge and expertise could still take one a long, long way.

"You wield the art clumsily and painfully," Valor said, gesturing for Confriga to come at him.

The Lesser Marshal stumbled forward on weak legs. He still slashed down so fast that Shiv could barely follow.

Yet Adam didn't fire his arrow, for Valor dodged before Confriga ever struck by exploiting the fact he had no true body and recomposing his limbs behind Confriga. Then, Valor jabbed Confriga in the back of his leg. The limb immediately began to burn and rot, and the Lesser Marshal went down with a ragged cry. "Your swordsmanship also needs work. You are quite good, I suspect, when you are hale. But when angry and spent, you fight like a Initiate, over-extending, over-exaggerating, pouring everything into your emotions. This is not a thing of feelings, boy. This is a thing of purpose and effectiveness. Get up. Strike me down. Do it again."

Confriga exploded into action. He roared, swinging his sword as hard as he could, from as many angles as he could, but time and time again, he was sent back to his knees as Valor casually struck the same point over and over. In seconds, Confriga's right leg was little more than a mangled, withered stump. The Lesser Marshal whimpered, but he managed to turn it into a growl of absolute hate. "You... you dare toy with me?"

"Is there anything stopping me?" Valor asked, more than a little condescension in his voice. "You played slaver, master, brute, and tyrant. And now, at your moment of final weakness, when you are spent, you are here, still spitting your spittle like a child. You embarrass me. You embarrass everyone who has ever practiced Necromancy. You embarrass anyone who has ever held a sword. And you embarrass your god in everything that you have ever worked for."

As if the System was waiting to make Confriga's humiliation complete, a notification appeared in everyone's vision.

Gate Mana Synchronization in Progress: Guardshead Leu recognized as new Gate Lord Candidate...

"Leu," Confriga breathed, his eyes widening. "Leu!" he roared to the heavens. "HELP ME! HELP ME, AND I WILL SEE YOU REWARDED!"

"I will do no such thing, Confriga," Leu said through the mana core. Suddenly, there was a pressure, a clench in the air as Guardshead Leu appeared, just a few steps away from the downed Gate Lord. The mana core came alive again, and with it followed a sudden drop in temperature. "Do you remember, Confriga? Do you remember some centuries ago, when you killed a juvenile Volteg? When you butchered him in front of his only remaining sibling?"

Confriga paused, thinking. "You... I... What?"

"You cannot," Leu said, a note of disappointment but also acceptance in her voice. "I know you cannot. Cruelty is in your nature. He is likely not the only juvenile you slew. But he was my clutch-brother. Mine. The only reason I made it to adolescence. The only reason!"

For the first time, she truly snarled, and it sounded like something was trying to claw its way out of her. But impossibly, Guardshead Leu wrestled herself back under control. "I... I have dreamed of this moment for so long. For so long, I have plotted and schemed and prayed. And I have done everything I could, everything to prepare myself. But there was no preparing myself," Leu began to laugh, "for how sweet this is. For how miserable you look. For how broken you are."

Gate Lord Confriga stared at Leu as understanding dawned in his expression. "You... How long? All this for revenge? Centuries of your life... Your service, your exemplary behavior... All just to take revenge on me?" He sounded like he couldn't understand the concept, couldn't understand giving so much of oneself just to hurt him.

"Yes!" Leu said, a hint of madness entering her voice. "And it was worth it. Every second. Every moment dedicated to hating you was worth it. And now: scream." The mana core flared, bringing down a concentrated beam of cold upon Confriga. As he tried to stop the surging mana, Valor cut his other leg, severing the limb with a single blow and cracking parts of the Lesser Marshal's soul. Confriga roared in absolute agony. He crashed down, landing in a puddle of his own blood. Shiv felt his Magical Resistance come asunder, and several other things broke inside him as well.

But just then, a shudder ran through Shiv. No! Nononono! Desperation! A point of true desperation! The bindings are coming undone! The bargain comes due! It sees us! It sees me!

"Rose? Rose, what's wrong?" Shiv said aloud.

Adam looked at him. "What do you mean? Rose? What's happening to my mother?"

"I don't know," Shiv replied, tension spiking inside him.

Through it all, the beam of pure frost continued to build, continued to torture the howling Confriga. Valor looked down with disdain as Leu cackled with mad laughter.

The Gate Lord is broken! Confriga has given up hope! He's passed that final point of true despair! He's passed it! He's going to make it! His final, absolute offering!

Outside Context Problem: The Lesser Marshal's end draws near. And the shackles on Absence break at last.

Today will be a feast to remember. Today, living history and animated legends will wet the Recollector's eyes...

Chapter 84 (III) Fall [III]

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Today will be a feast to remember. Today, living history and animated legends will wet the Recollector's eyes...

Shiv made his decision immediately. Whatever Rose was terrified about, it had to do with Confriga and the sword. No more risks, just like Adam said. He fired multiple bone drills into Confriga, punching through his skull, hammering length after length into the Lesser Marshal's open wounds. Even so, Confriga tried to act.

He seized his blade with both hands and let out a cry that turned into a shriek of pain as Shiv reached out with his Biomancy and liquefied Confriga. The Vulteg turned to blood—but the gore that sprayed free from Confriga froze in place.

And then Absence rose into the air.

Shiv felt something coming. Uva felt it too. She saw something in the sword, something that made her gasp. "Shiv, the sword! Destroy the sword!"

Shiv did. He swung his corpse flail out, launching it against the edge of Absence as hard as he could. He impacted the blade, and—

And the mirage that shrouded the blade this entire time faded. Its edge glowed, and it became a crescent-shaped iris, as the true shape hidden by the blade and Confriga's existence emerged.

Suddenly, a tide of gold smashed into everyone. Chronomancy. Shiv parried the spell with his Magebreaker, and, with an extreme effort, forced the spell aside. Uva was saved due to being inside his mind, and Adam, thanks to his rapier's Temporal Warding Enchantment, endured as well. But Valor found himself frozen in place. As did everyone else—everything else within sight. The ones affected were coated in motes of gold, falling like grains of sand from their body.

Then, there was a colossal shape looming over the splatter where Confriga was. It just appeared. No movement. No magic. One second it wasn't. And then it was. It dwarfed the Jealousy by perhaps five times over, and looking at it hurt Shiv's eyes. It had so many limbs, lined with so many eyes. The best he could describe its general form was a carpet of black, oily limbs and tentacles clustered together. But where its head was supposed to be was a massive, ten-fingered hand lined with blinking eyes that twisted downwards in a spiral. The eyes kept going across the entire hand until they finally vanished into a maw that descended into the depths of the palm, and the eyes were constantly moving, like they were small buoys on an ocean.

Shiv's mind recoiled as he struggled to process the true shape of what he was viewing. Nausea swept through him and a deep ache gripped his mind, but with a snarl of rage, he fought through the discomfort.

Adam failed to.

The Young Lord bent over and emptied the contents of his stomach. His eyes rolled, and he clutched his head. Shiv caught Adam. He called out the Young Lord's name, but Adam was unresponsive, babbling incoherently, just like Rose and even Uva.

Once more, Shiv turned his head and stared at the horrid creature. It was now staring down at him with all its eyes. Shiv launched his cancer flail immediately. It impacted the large palm the creature had for a head, and—

Shiv's flail faded to nothing.

One second it was there. The next it was gone. Shiv couldn't remember—it did something, but—

"Confriga... You have finally died. I weep. I sing. I come to collect your legends... The stories that make you... you."

The being's voice was beautiful, even mesmerizing. Adam began to weep violently beside him, and Uva and Rose did the same within. Shiv felt sick, and it felt like... something terrible was constantly happening—something was constantly being done to him and the others, but he couldn't remember what.

Shiv let out a cry of effort as he shifted out of context.

Uva fell out of him. The world went gray. He charged the monster and drove his kukri into one of its—

Shiv's senses returned to him as he vomited blood all over himself. It... it was like he suddenly lost track of time. There was something that just happened, but he couldn't remember what. He just—there were pieces missing from his memory. It was then that he noticed that Uva, Adam, and Valor were leaning over him, trying to drag him away. Every last one of his ribs were broken. He was bleeding internally. Shiv growled and used a Woundeater on himself. His wounds filled the wyrm, and he let Uva and Adam pull him up.

Before him, the nightmarish entity cupped the gore-splatter that had been Confriga with its tentacles, and it formed a Chronomancy spell around it. Slowly, it turned the spell in place, and a small shroud appeared. Within, time turned backward, and in an instant, Confriga reformed to the state just before his death.

“What—” Adam gasped. “What in the Broken Moon... Shiv. I can’t—I can’t remember what just happened.”

“Yeah,” Shiv breathed as he clenched his kukri tight and prepared to fight. “Me neither. But this thing needs to die.”

Just as he prepared to charge the monster again, it extended a limb, and a wave of Chronomancy crashed into him and all the others. This time, Shiv froze in place—just like when he was falling from Blackedge and encountered Sullain. He tried to move, did everything he could to resist, but he was pinned.

Adam’s rapier flared white-hot as it tried to resist the spell with its Temporal Warding. The weapon shattered into pieces as the monster’s magic overcame it after a second. Adam froze too, just as he manifested an Arrow.

"How odd." The entity blinked right in front of Shiv, taking up his entire field of view. One of its many limbs pointed at him, and he felt something inside his body quiver. "This one managed to hit me in my other past. How resilient. Not quite human, not quite System, not quite full Pathbearer. Not the same. No end, no point. Where is the point of death? Can't find... Strange. Will need to investigate. Drink your time deep."

The creature was suddenly beside Confriga again. "Do you see? See why you're in this position now, Confriga? The Stranger blessed you with me for a reason. To save both of us. To give both of us new meaning. The Necromancy we bestowed upon you was never going to be enough. The certitude of your death... Inevitable. I promised this would happen when you accepted my bargain. So many histories where this happens. You didn't believe me, despite your worries. Now. It is time for the final and complete bargain. Give me your time. Give me your legend. Give me your history. Bear me as your child, and birth yourself through me. Or die. Or die. OR DIE!"

Confriga pulled away from the verge of death, moaning. "I... I will give you... everything. All I have left. I give you this body. I give you my life. I give you..." Confriga drew in a harsh breath and sobbed. "I give you my history. All that I have been, all that I could be. Just... kill them. Avenge me. Avenge me, and you will have your true existence in the material world, beyond the periphery. A real body in this place, one that will not dissolve with the passage of time. Is that not what you wanted? Is that—"

All of a sudden, the massive creature blurred forward. It didn't travel through space; it simply existed in one place, and then it started existing in another, its original form fading. It seized Confriga, and it poured its immense mass into him.

Suddenly, the time spell broke. Everyone could move again. They all responded immediately, launching spells of Necromancy, Biomancy, Psychomancy, arrows, bone drills, and icicles. But every attack simply vanished just as it got close to hitting Confriga. Like there were never any attacks to begin with.

Then, Confriga suddenly burst apart into a splatter of gore again. Shiv's eyes widened as he saw what remained in his place. It was a large, golden egg, and oily shadows were slowly creeping across its surface.

Runrunrunrunrun— Rose howled inside Shiv.

He didn't. He shifted out of context and shot toward the egg with his kukri. Shiv drove his weapon into the egg as he emerged, and—

Time shifted. Confriga caught Shiv's kukri by the edge with an open hand. But it wasn't Confriga anymore. Those black-crescent eyes lined every inch of his body. Black oil seeped out from his very being like an aura, and reaching hands and festering tentacles replaced the wings he'd lost. And where his onyx eye once gazed, now the hand of the strange monster that had emerged from Absence took its place.

"Ah," the transformed Confriga sighed. "This is... so tight... Time flowing over me and not dissolving. Not taking away. I can feel it now. Passage of time. Progression. Strange."

And then Shiv noticed his companions were frozen behind him. As was he.

Again, it was like he was missing an entire section of—

The entity made a gesture. Guardshead Leu blinked into its twisted hand. Suddenly, fractals of gold burst around her as she drew breath, her eye widening. "I—"

The entity closed its fingers. Leu's head came apart.

Shiv tried to scream. He couldn't. Shiv tried to rage. He couldn't. Shiv tried to shift out of context. He just couldn't.

Gate Mana Desynchronized: Guardshead Leu no longer recognized as Gate Lord.

“Strange entity. Struck me twice. Forced me to sever two pasts from myself. Not sure how. No matter. No need for separate pasts anymore. Have future. Have past. Have present. And you...” Its eyes rolled to face Shiv. “...have none.”

With a casual twist, the monster that wore Confriga shattered Shiv’s kukri into glittering fragments.

Equipment Lost: [Rememberer of Wounds]

Shiv’s heart plunged, and, frozen in time without any chance to resist, the entity turned him around, forcing him to face his companions as it wrapped its fingers around his face. Chronomancy fractals broke off Uva, Valor, and Adam’s heads. Can Hu’s half-skull dangled behind Shiv, removed before the whole nightmare began.

“Shiv!” Uva cried, sounding more terrified than he'd ever heard her. Her eyes were locked on the thing that Confriga became as it laughed.

“Let him go, you godsdamned bastard!” Adam struggled. But he was pinned by time, and there was no hope of escape.

Shiv tried to use his magic. It didn’t work. So he tried Outside Context Problem again. It didn’t work. He couldn’t do anything while frozen in time.

"I taste your past," the thing whispered into his ear. "You are odd. You have no end. Not like all the others. Even your soul is deviant. Tampered with. History is wrong around you. Part of you is dislocated from time—from everything. Will not suffer this. Will take you away from history. But the mind-dancer..." It looked at Uva, and Shiv's heart flared with anger and fear. "She can see more. She has moved through one of mine and emerged unchanged. This offends me. She will not be unchanged when I finish with her."

Shiv tried to shift again and again. He tried everything. He tried—

The thing that was Confriga slowly drove its fingers into his eyes. It released the magic holding his head still as it blinded him. Shiv guessed it wanted to hear him scream as his sight was taken. He just spat on its hands instead, even as he felt its fingers sink deep into his sockets.

"No screams?" it asked.

"Not a godsdamned one, you piece of shit," Shiv snarled, gritting his teeth against the pain. He tried shifting—and still nothing. He needed his entire body to—

It twisted his neck violently. His head snapped backward, something cracking inside his body. And it twisted his head again for good measure. Uva spat curses of hate and venom at the monster as it took Shiv apart. Adam gagged and called out to Shiv. Through it all, Valor was silent. As was Shiv.

This thing... It was... He thought about what it could do as his life slipped from him—about all the missing moments he experienced just now. What happened was far too jarring for mere amnesia. This was Chronomancy like he'd never experienced before. But how was he going to—

The creature pulled back and tore his head clean off.

A moment later, Shiv respawned as a Revenant beside his body. An emptiness filled his right hand as his Rememberer lay in pieces on the ground. Shit!

The entity slowly advanced on Uva, Adam, and Valor.

“Come, then!” Uva called out to it first, taunting it. “Let me show you how a Daughter of the Order dies!”

“No, ignore her!” Adam cried. “I’m Roland Arrow’s son! I planned all this! She—she was just a mercenary hired. Leave her alone!”

“Adam,” Valor said. “It does not understand. Nor does it care. It is not from here.”

“What?” Adam asked, his eyes snapping between Valor and the enemy.

“It is a creature from the Far Periphery,” Valor said. “Are you not?”

The thing wearing Confriga laughed, the sound layered and wrong. “And you are Valor Thann. The Stranger remembers you... and the scar you left on them.” It looked between Uva and Adam. “Hm. Don’t need the boy. The girl will be a good vessel for another.”

No! Shiv charged the creature. But every time he got closer to the creature, he would suddenly jolt back to where he started a few seconds ago. Damned time magic! How the hells am I—

Then, his death notifications loaded, appearing just as the last thought passed through his mind.

Adamantine Adaption > 127

Gravitic Wrestler > 125

Skill Gained: Chronomancy (Adept)

Chronomancy > 1

Quest Complete: Repel the vampiric invasion and eliminate all infiltrating Aviary assets in Gate Theborn before they overcome the defenses and slay Gate Lord Confriga first.

Select a Skill to Evolve to Master-Tier

And suddenly, Shiv's near-desperate terror hardened into burning rage. System... You MOTHERFUCKER!

Chapter 85 (I) Chronomancer

The System can move in both subtle and vulgar ways. But when it gets vulgar, it gets very, very vulgar.

I'll say something right now, something that most Pathbearers don't like to admit out loud. Call it superstition, call it self-preservation; they just don't like mentioning it. But most of us? Well, we think the System's a piece of shit.

Sure, it gives us power, and that's great. There's nothing like being a Pathbearer, performing an action over and over, pushing yourself, and going beyond everything you were before. But the System only gives you that power so it can throw you at something else. It just wants to see you struggle and, eventually, die. The System is a goddamn conflict generator. No, a conflict eater.

Hey, I've got a personal theory. It came to me one day as I marched on a battlefield, right as a mana storm emerged from nowhere. You want to know why I think it appeared? Because we had just smashed our enemy, taken barely any losses, and the System wasn't satisfied. So it sent a storm after us.

We hunkered down, and inside that storm were primal dragons.

You ever fight a dragon, Reader? If you have, then you understand what I'm talking about. There's no monster quite like a dragon. You can launch all the magic you want at the damn monsters; it'll only make it stronger. It'll drink up a good portion of it and smash right into you. You need to gather your entire mage corps just to really affect one normally, and if they smash into your backline, you'll see what mass death is.

I barely managed to wrestle one down long enough for my wife to take its head off.

We didn't do anything to start that fight. We didn't go anywhere near the mana storm. It hunted us! It followed us! An army a million strong, and those goddamn dragons killed 200,000 of us. We killed maybe 150 of them in return, and then the storm just passed through.

And in the end, the only reason we got out of that was because we had a Heroic-Tier Chronomancer with us, blinking around the battlefield, drawing the bulk of the dragons' attentions away.

At the end of it all, I gained my sixth Master-Tier skill. We hadn't even gotten a Quest for that. It was just a random slaughter that happened without reason.

That was when I learned to truly hate the System.

Then, a month later, my wife lay bleeding to death in my arms. And that new skill I got? The "Seal Wound" skill I had failed to use to save my friends? I used it on her, and she lived.

And I wasn't so hateful of the System anymore.

But I am terrified of it. And I am scared of what it might do to me next.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

As Shiv selected a skill without thought, his insides boiled. He boiled with rage at the System's hand, which had deliberately pushed him to this place. He boiled with rage at the eldritch entity, which was extending the oily tendrils that now composed Confriga's wings toward Adam, Uva, and Valor.

Come on! Shiv roared silently. Come on!

"Adam... No, no, no, please," Rose moaned within him, reaching out for her son from leagues beyond his reach.

The entity had a protective veil of Chronomancy that displaced Shiv every time he got close. He never stopped trying to consume the entity's vitality. With his Chronomancy manifesting as a feeble layer of golden grains over his body, however, all he managed was pushing a bit further into the entity's shroud before he was launched back in time.

Yet, as his Skill Evolution took hold, things became different. Shiv observed the entire process of his displacement. It wasn't as sudden or jarring as before. Instead, he felt himself snap two seconds backward. A heavy current of unseen Chronomancy mana smashed into him, driving him away with ease.

That's why I couldn't hurt it earlier! Godsdamned Chronomancy! It could have kept me at bay like this forever if I hadn't gained my own Chronomancy Skill. Come on! Evolve! Hurry up!

The first of its oily tendrils snaked around Adam's armor, seizing the Young Lord as he struggled in vain.

"G-get back you—tainted thing!" Adam spat, his voice thick with absolute dread. Still, he glared at the entity with all the hate and defiance he could muster. If there was one thing about Adam, it was that he was going to do the right thing. He was going to be a Pathbearer, even if it scared him to death.

Uva, meanwhile, went entirely cold. She said nothing, simply scowling at the beast with disdain as its limbs projected toward her. The only one more unresponsive was Valor; the ancient Pathbearer seemed resigned.

"Shiv," Valor called out, "this is not your fault. This is what it means to be favored. Whatever happens, do not cling to it. Let the pain pass through you—"

Shiv ignored Valor. The System gave him a skill, and he was going to be godsdamned if he was going to let this monster take his companions from him.

Skill Evolution: Chronomancy (Adept) > Strider of the Unbending Path (Master)

Shiv felt something burst out from within his Vitae, blossoming outward to cover him as if a flower in bloom. A second before, his Chronomancy was but a thin trickle of motes over his body, so faint he could barely feel it. Like Necromancy, its mana seemed to work differently from his Biomancy, shrouding him tightly rather than projecting itself outward as a field. As soon as his Skill Evolution completed, his Chronomancy transformed. And his relationship with time itself changed as well.

The thin film ignited and swelled with potency, with the glittering, golden dust melded together into fluid and resplendent armor. The massive spike in power flooded Shiv with a rush unlike any he had ever experienced. More than that, existence quivered around him, and his senses felt something entirely new.

All his life, he had known the world as something material, something to interact with using his body or, more recently, his magic. Now, the world had another sensation to it. It wasn't visible, but it was something he could feel. There was a flow to the world, to time. Time was constantly passing, constantly pushing him toward the future, an ever-present pressure gliding him along like a current in a river. Previously, he had been so submerged in it that he was ignorant, drowned. But as his Chronomancy shot to Master-Tier, it was like he had suddenly developed fins and gills. He had surfaced. He could feel the exact sensation of time passing against him, concentrating around him.

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The gold that shrouded him, the mana of Chronomancy itself, was no longer a thin film. It was more than just an outer shell as well, but something akin to a second layer to his very being. The flowing currents that comprised the Strider of the Unbending Path imbued him with the power to defy the passing of time and press forward.

Forward into the time-inverting waves unleashed by the entity.

Just then, Adam cried out. He pulled his head back as one of the entity's tentacles shot upward through his chin, splitting the Young Lord's lower jaw in half. Blood welled. Adam screamed. Rose howled out for him. Shiv's heart exploded into a firestorm of rage.

In that desperate moment, Shiv defied the passage of time itself. The act was purely reflexive. He directed the flow of his temporal shell against the path which time crossed. The effect was immediate. The fluid gold armor solidified against the rushing currents of the fleeting present. A building pressure slammed into Shiv—an intense and immense weight. But Shiv defied the will of time as his armor trembled and lashed against the progress of history. He fed every last bit of his rage into his Chronomancy, and, for a moment, the struggle lessened.

Time ground to a near halt. Everyone froze.

Everyone but Shiv.

A coldness radiated through him as more of his vitality slipped away, but in that frozen instant, Shiv couldn't help but regard his new magical power with awe and wonder. With every passing second, a strain was building against him. Time was ever-moving, and the weight it directed against him was always climbing. He wouldn't be able to sustain the growing pressure pushing against him for long, but for that moment, Shiv was a new kind of pillar—a dam against time.

Shiv moved, and it felt like he was sprinting underwater. Even with his immense strength, it felt like battling his way against a raging rapid with every step toward the entity. But he could still move! As he stomped toward the entity, he flinched as his newly evolved Chronomancy revealed something else to him.

The entity had vast, golden rivers connected to its body. Within those rivers floated faint echoes of the entity itself, but from a previous instance in time. Each of the echoes was neatly and evenly spaced, and Shiv guessed that it represented a separation of a single second in time. He remembered the creature talking about how it had another past. This was likely why. It had several pathways of Chronomancy extending into the near past. He also noted a building, golden accretion layering the space around the original entity itself. Somehow, he could instinctively tell that something to do with the future. The way this entity existed was discordant with reality, and time made its displeasure known against it as well, albeit to no avail.

Near the entity's true body, the rivers curved and became something of a spiral. Even with Shiv holding his own passage in time still, he could see the entity's curving rivers still moving slowly. They also seemed to be leaking fractals out into reality.

Steeling himself, Shiv managed his final few steps and smashed through the inner layer of Chronomancy mana that enshrouded the entity as if a bubble. The entity's protective Chronomancy deformed. Shiv speared his palm on the entity's lower back. Vitality exploded through him. The only time he felt more vitality flood into him at once was when he was facing the formless god while fighting the Educator.

Vitality Drain > 46

Revenant > 40

"What is this?!" the entity cried. Shiv nearly flinched away in surprise, but he held firm. Its voice wailed forth from every river connected to it. And to Shiv's surprise, every last echo within those rivers turned and noticed him. "Hm? Hidden Chronomancer? How? From where? Couldn't sense you. But... I sense everything?"

Shiv cast a laceration into the entity just as his shadowy cocoon started to form. To his delight, the entity split in half as his Woundeater dove into its body. He cast several more laceration spells and one Bowel-Breaker for good measure. The entity came apart. The hand and fingers that formed its face turned into chunks of oily-black ichor. Its "blood" slithered out of existence even as it peeled apart before Shiv's temporal onslaught.

Strider of the Unbending Path > 101

Woundeater > 76

Yet, before he ever could rejoice, a section of the entity's river crashed into it, superimposing one of its echoes over its recently butchered body. That river got noticeably shorter; it sacrificed an entire section of itself to perform the act Shiv just witnessed. But the entity was alive again. And it was aware of what just happened. Aware because it could view Shiv's frozen present from a few seconds in the past.

What the hells am I fighting? Shiv shuddered. No wonder entire chunks of time were missing from his recollection earlier. This thing was probably attacking him from a place he just couldn't defend. But how? Valor said that changing history itself was impossible without severe consequences and a ludicrous amount of mana. Was he fighting another god? Was the local mana stability about to collapse? It seemed fine. Everything about the damned entity was unnatural. Of course, that's not going to stop me from kicking your ass.

Shiv's resurrective cocoon burst around him. The Deathless snarled as he drove the hardest uppercut he could against the entity. A blast of force exploded around the damned hand it had for a face. Frozen in time against Shiv's Strider, it couldn't move. Shiv was about to hit it again when a crack formed over his Strider. The golden shell was on the verge of shattering beneath history's building mass. Shiv knew he couldn't endure much longer.

Ten seconds, Shiv recalled with a silent groan. I can practically stop my personal passage of time for ten seconds. But no more than that. Gods, it feels like I'm about to break apart.

But he couldn't just drop his Chronomancy right now. It was the only thing protecting him from the entity's abilities. And Adam was going to die if he let time resume. The entity was going to drive its tentacle up through the Young Lord's skull. Out of time and options, Shiv cast a final spell at the tentacle as he reduced his struggle against time. Reduced; he didn't stop.

The effects were absolute and astonishing. The world around him jerked back into motion. Slow motion. Shiv's Strider was still cracking apart, but not nearly as fast as it did when he held time back from moving him at all. The entity reacted as well—and it was far faster than he was without a full Momentum Core.

It slammed his Chronomancy against him, smashing its rivers into his body. As it's unnatural time magic colliding against him, more of Shiv's golden shell burst apart, revealing the Deathless within. But he stood his ground. He remained a dam, a pillar against time itself. The world wasn't going to make him bend. And neither was this godsdamned abomination.

"Move!" the entity commanded. Every one of its echoes howled the command thereafter. Several of the echoes flicked their foul tentacles into Shiv, and cuts opened across his body beneath the entity's discordant touch. The Strider didn't protect one from physical damage. But it kept Shiv pinned to the present, even as it broke away bit by bit. And his Adamantine Adaption diminished each of the entity's following blows.

"Away! I cast you away! Back into my past!" it cried again. "You will move—" Shiv's shifted out of context. The creature froze. Every single one of its echoes stared on at the space where Shiv once existed. Beyond causality, Shiv flared his gravitic field and blasted up into the air, carrying the entity high. His Vitae exploded around him on impact, and the entity let out a sanity-rending howl. But its focus was broken. The rivers of time connected to it splashed about wildly in the same fashion as its tentacles.

"And you can eat shit!" Shiv roared as he punted the entity in the chest with all his strength. He hit it so hard his right shin was completely fractured. A five-hundred meter wide shockwave tore through the air as his gravitic field sent the entity shooting into the distance like a pebble, its tentacles and rivers of Chronomancy mana trailing behind it.

Adamantine Adaption > 128

Gravitic Wrestler > 126

As soon as the entity was more than a kilometer away, Shiv spiked himself back down to the ground. He fed his fracture to a wyrm as he crashed down beside Adam and ripped the tentacle out from the Young Lord's face. Adam's lower jaw was a mutilated mess. One that immediately went away as Shiv cast a Woundeater into him as well.

"Come on," Shiv said, reaching down and pulling Adam to his feet. "You're alright! You're going to be alright!"

Chapter 85 (II) Chronomancer

Adam clutched at his face as he hyperventilated. Stress-filled tears spilled out from the Young Lord's eyes as he struggled to remain composed, and Shiv's gut twisted. He briefly pulled Adam into a comforting embrace before rushing off to check on Uva, Valor, and Can Hu in turn.

"Are you alright?" Shiv said, examining Uva.

"I'm fine," she said. A mana strand shot out from her into Adam. She grimaced as the Dimensional Archer spasmed. A second later, he snapped out of his state of shock as he battled to get his breath under control.

"T-thanks," Adam said. His face was still bone white, and his heart was beating dangerously fast. "That thing... What the bloody hells was that thing? Just looking at it made my mind twist."

“It is an outsider,” Valor said, his tone grave. “An eldritch being. It should not be here. It cannot be here without a proper host or vessel that is strong enough to contain its unnatural nature. And now it has one.” The Legendary Pathbearer regarded Shiv. “But... how did—”

“Chronomancy,” Shiv spat. “I have Chronomancy. I chose it as my Master-Tier Skill. The System—the motherfucking System has been planning this all along. The kukri before—it was all to attune me. Just in time. Has to be.”

Adam briefly froze. “You’re a felling Master-Tier Chronomancer now too?”

“I didn’t have a godsdamned choice,” Shiv growled. He reeled Can Hu in with the rest of them using his Biomancy, and the automaton crackled incoherently. “The entity, it has—it’s got these rivers connected to it. Extensions into the past that it can just—Uva!”

She shifted his memories across, and aside from the part where he went out of context, they saw all of it.

“Ascendants,” Adam breathed. “Valor, you said—”

“The eldritch do not function entirely under the laws of the System,” Valor answered. “We must flee. Adam. Teleport us. Now.”

But before the Young Lord could do anything, it soared over several buildings and drifted toward them. Its massive black tendrils were spilled wide—a horrific parody of Confriga’s burning petals. Worse, the rivers of time it had reached even wider, and the many eyes lining its body glared down at Shiv with an alien hate he couldn’t comprehend.

“Anomaly,” the entity seethed. The word was repeated across all its echoes. “Acausality. Will learn the limits of your nature. Will make sure you are forgotten after...”

Shiv spat in the entity’s direction. “Godsdamned asshole. There. We traded barbs.” He clenched his fists. “Now, let’s get bloody.” He shot a brief look at his companions, and his nerves briefly shook. Uva. Adam. Valor. Can Hu. None of them were ready for this kind of fight—for an entity that could attack them from across history. “Listen. I’ll try to hold this thing off. I can contend with its Chronomancy myself. At least for a while. But I absolutely can’t face it and keep any of you alive at the same time. When you get the chance, just teleport. Do not wait for me, just go.”

“But—” Adam said.

“Understood,” Uva replied. Shiv could sense how sick she felt, how much she didn’t want to let him face the entity alone, but she realized his plan.

Shiv continued. “Get some breathing room. Spend—spend some time developing a plan of attack. I’ll try to stay alive as long as I can and force it to show all its tricks. Adam. Observe the fight and try to figure something out. Find an opening. Uva. It doesn’t have Magical Resistance, but this thing’s mind is... Everything about it is wrong. Don’t... Just don’t go in if you don’t have a better choice.”

“I fear we’re all out of better choices, Shiv,” she replied, a look of hardened resignation in her eyes. “You’ll do what must be done. And so will I.”

A chill ran through him, but he just nodded. “Be quick, Adam. I don’t think—” Shiv’s words trailed off as he manifested his temporal shell. The fluid, golden armor flared around him, but to his surprise, it was

practically repaired. What few cracks it still had were filled as more time passed over him. Time. Time wasn't just his enemy. It was something he could wield now. It was the very foundation of Chronomancy itself. "I'll give you as much time as you need."

"I—Yes. Just. Don't die for good, you bastard," Adam said, doing everything to keep his shame and worry in check.

"Go show the entity who the real monster is," Uva added. Inside, she wasn't much calmer than Adam. "We will return. We will kill this thing. We will find a way. Endure. Fight. Be who you are."

"Fully intend to." Despite everything, Shiv grinned. He knew in his bones that the fight was going to be hell. But he intended to make it hell for both him and the abomination.

The entity blasted down through the air. Shiv sprinted forward to meet its charge. Its tendrils spread out wide; rivers of retroactive Chronomancy surged down to splash over him and his companions. Shiv's gravitic field thundered around his form. He bent his legs and leaped. The ground beneath his feet exploded as he accelerated toward the entity. Its rivers and tentacles shot out to seize him. Shiv's temporal shell turned solid. Time practically stopped

Ten seconds. Time to make them count.

He cried out with effort as he forcibly stretched out his present moment. Immediately, he discovered another limitation to his immense power. Where normally his immense speed allowed him to cross vast leagues of distance in the span of seconds, now he was only traveling the gulf of meters with each spike of his gravitic field. Even with Gravitic Wrestler, it was like trying to fly across the bottom of a deep ocean. Shiv wondered how people with lesser Physicalities managed to endure the halting of time.

Then, it occurred to him that Sullain and this entity might only have stopped time for other people. They themselves seemed to exist in the natural flow of the present.

It took three seconds before his Biomancy was in range of the creature. He cast both wounds into the entity. Its face and leg came apart before; once more, it “reloaded” itself with a stored instance of a past self. Shiv searched for the river that had been shortened earlier, but his stomach turned to lead as he realized its rivers were all the same length again.

Whatever the entity’s Chronomancy had lost was already restored. It wasn’t so different from Shiv’s Strider. But despite being able to stop time, he couldn’t help but feel that he had the inferior Chronomancy Skill Evolution between them. He ripped the entity apart five more times before he finally crashed into it physically. To Shiv’s displeasure, he couldn’t kill any of its echoes before they were brought into the present to replace what it had lost.

With every death, its rivers shortened, but not nearly fast enough. It had hundreds of backup bodies from the past—with a chance to recover all of them if Shiv gave it a chance to breathe. This is godsdamned bullshit... Wait, is this what fighting me feels like?

He spiked his gravitic field into the entity’s body and started punching it. It lurched backward by meters with every blow, even as Shiv’s Momentum Core filled. If traveling through restrained time was hard alone, doing it with someone else felt like lugging a lead ball as a Pathless. The first cracks spread along his temporal shell, and Shiv let some fluidity return to the Strider. Time moved again—then jolted to a near halt once more as Shiv discharged his Momentum Core.

He threw the hardest right hook of his life into the open palm the entity had for a face. A shockwave of epic proportions swelled well beyond eight kilometers in radius as both Shiv and the entity ignited from velocity friction alone. They sailed through the air like a crimson comet. With time partially held back, Shiv cast Woundeater after Woundeater into the entity, killing it as many times as he could.

A melody of displeasure and annoyance left the creature's many echoes. The first of its many retroactive rivers smashed into Shiv again, cleaving a deep fissure into his temporal shell. "Won't move? Why? Hm?" Shiv kept killing it over and over, and it regarded him more with curiosity than animosity now. Its rivers arced suddenly, becoming a collective spiral that smashed into him again and again.

Entire sections of Shiv's temporal shell broke away, but the parts that remained prevented him from being cast back into the past.

"Feels like a fixed point in time. A hard point in time. A stone with legs and hands. Stone that learned how to swim against the tide. Hard temporal shell. Skill... Know this Skill Evolution. Strider of the Unbending Path. Rare. Strange for a human to develop such a Skill Evolution. More common for dragons. Defies temporal storms..."

"Shut up and fight!" Shiv snarled as he continued hitting the creature over and over. He beheaded it with another Biomancy spell, but before he could continue, another river crashed into him, and finally, his temporal shell shattered. One of the echoes slammed into Shiv and casually drove a clawed hand through his chest.

Suddenly, he was defenseless before the entity's Chronomancy again. Defenseless, but no longer unaware. As soon as the retroactive currents slammed into him, he jolted back in time—zipping back to where he was twenty seconds ago. The world blurred into colors around him as he jolted across time and space. He came to a stop right above the plaza, just as Adam and the others teleported.

The Young Lord caught sight of Shiv, and his face twisted in abject horror.

"Go!" Shiv howled, clutching the gaping wound in his gut. He—the echo was still there, with its arm inside him. It had detached from the rest of the river. Slowly, Shiv stared into its hand-head, into the

many crescent eyes that glittered at him. Then, with a ripple of gold, the original entity swapped places with its echo just as Adam and the others teleported away.

But not fast enough.

It directed a surging river over the point where the party just departed, and Shiv's eyes widened as Adam's Dimensional magic reversed itself, as the teleportation bubble receded, casting his companions back to the present. Within the river, the echoes of the entity reached out to tear his family apart. Shiv went from fear to absolute fury in an instant. Fury he fed into his Chronomancy.

The broken segments of his fast-reforming armor flared. Time didn't halt, but it slowed just enough for Shiv to cast a Psychomancy link into the entity's mind. He triggered his Icon of the Paindrinker just as he flayed the left side of his body open with his Biomancy. Pain. Shiv channeled every bit of pain he could into the creature.

For a second, the entity paused, and Shiv thought he was overloading it with agony. But then, an inhuman note of laughter sounded from inside the entity as it clenched his mind tight. "Ah. Pain. Not something I have. You keep. No. Wait. Let me show you other pain. Other pain I have recollected. Compare. Here is Confriga's."

And it dumped a deluge of torturous memories into Shiv as a response—the moment Valor took his legs and shattered his very soul with Necromancy. Shiv clenched his teeth as his insides twisted and came asunder with near-unbearable suffering. He headbutted the entity twice—and desperate anger exploded within him as he heard a series of loud snaps, followed by stomach-turning shrieks from Uva and Adam.

He fed all his rage into a punch that disintegrated the entity's head. It respawned and flung him down to the ground just a few meters away from his companions. Shiv impacted the ground and bounced. The entity slammed a series of tentacles through his torso. His Adamantine Adaption hardened him. Instead of being casually torn apart by the impossible strong horror, it merely caved his chest in. Existence

turned to torture. Shiv vomited blood all over the entity's inky-black tentacles. Then he cast a laceration at it. The entity was promptly beheaded—and immediately returned to life. Before it could do anything else, Shiv shifted out of context.

He sank back into his own Vitae as he flung himself toward his allies.

What he saw nearly made Shiv vomit again.

Uva's screams were the first thing that he truly noticed—and something that sent his rage into the stratosphere. One of the echoes had her pinned beneath its feet, had dismembered her arms and legs by ripping them free of her body. The pain on her face, the anguish in her shrieks—

Adam was beside her. Adam wasn't moving. Adam's head was pointed the wrong way entirely. Rose started screaming at Shiv, then, adding to the chaos. Another echo had Valor clutched between the fingers of its head-hand. The Legendary Pathbearer didn't cry out, but the flames in his eyes were being siphoned into it—siphoned somewhere else.

Nearby, Can Hu lay discarded, still holding onto Shiv's old corpse.

Something within Shiv's sanity buckled. But Shiv didn't break. He refused. Fuck you, System! FUCK YOU! They're mine! You can't take them! You won't take anything else from me!

The Challenger smiles upon you.

Shiv crashed into the entity's retroactive river. Every fiber of his being was soaked in pain, but his heart was an engine fueled by anger and spite. He spent it all on his Chronomancy. A shell of badly mauled but rapidly regenerating armor formed over him, and it went stone hard.

Time stilled.

Shiv triggered his Song of the Vigilant and prepared three wyrms. The first crashed into Adam—and the Young Lord's head snapped back in place. The second impacted Uva, and her limbs reappeared as the Woundeater consumed her wounds. He flung both wyrms into the entity with an animalistic snarl.

Its head snapped back. Its limbs came apart. It snapped back to life immediately after, but that reset its echoes and spared Adam, Uva, and the others.

Shiv's rage ran dry, and his temporal shell broke apart again.

A flicker of movement. That was all he noticed before the entity drove another tentacle into his chest. Shiv felt his muscles tear and his organs burst. He puked blood once more—and choked as three more tentacles smashed into him. Darkness crept in from the corners of his eyes, but he refused to black out.

He clutched the tentacles. Fought to pull them away. He cast another laceration spell, severing one of the lashing limbs—

The entity promptly slammed down against him, and Shiv felt his spine break in half. By this point, his body was broken, so he used his Biomancy to wield himself as a blunt weapon—tried to pry himself free from beneath the entity. But it wasn't enough, even as he poured more of his constantly growing rage into the skill.

“Come on,” Shiv grunted, his words coming in slurred breaths. “I’m... I’m not done. Come on...”

Adamantine Adaption > 129

Strider of the Unbending Path > 102

“Hm. Only Master-Tier in speed-fast without Chronomancy. Interesting. Test durability again. Need to reconstruct anomaly’s history manually. Understand. Unravel after understanding. But first... Why not flee? Stayed. For the others. Ah. Family. Loved ones. Interesting. Confriga still inside. What’s left of him. Wants me to experiment. Wants me to hurt this one badly. Mind and body. Hm. Easily done.”

The entity swapped places with an echo just as a Veilpiercer was about to hit it. A second and a loud snap later, the entity returned and dashed Adam on the ground right beside Shiv. The Young Lord’s face was partially caved in. Shiv used his Biomancy on Adam, restoring him. As soon as he did, as soon as Adam drew breath, the entity wrapped a tentacle around Adam’s neck and pulled.

“No!” Shiv roared. He reached with his Biomancy and forced Adam’s head to stay in place. The entity pulled casually—it wasn’t truly trying. In fact, rather than treating Adam with malice, it was observing Shiv.

Blood and tears ran down the Young Lord’s face. His tendons tore and his bones broke. But Shiv used wyrm after wyrm to keep him alive. Not even casting the Woundeaters into the entity interrupted it. A flash of corrosion flashed in the corner of Shiv’s vision. Valor unleashed his Necromancy on the entity. It simply swept the attack out of the current timeline using one of its many available retroactive rivers. It held the others back as it continued its cruel examination.

Faintly, Shiv could hear Confriga somewhere. The bastard was laughing. Laughing from within the entity.

Another tentacle swept out and pinned Valor a few meters away from Shiv. Something snapped. For the first time, Shiv heard the Legendary Pathbearer shout in genuine pain.

Makeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstop, Rose whimpered inside of him.

The entity was about to break Adam's neck again when Uva's shield shot toward it. The entity caught the shield without looking and ignored Uva's mana strands punching into its mind. She tried jumping into it. It caught her strands in a river of time and sent her back—back to the point where she just had her limbs ripped off.

The Umbral Psychomancer snapped across time like she was a rubberband and appeared to Shiv's left in a dismembered state. She tried to bite back her screams, but it was just too much at once.

Something inside Shiv broke. His sanity reeled. But he refused to collapse.

The Challenger roars with glee.

Shiv cast another Woundeater into Uva, restoring her again. But the entity just pinned her in place, and it regarded her for a moment. "Hm. Good. No. Won't hurt the female. No. Confriga. Cannot decide anymore. You gave yourself to me. I will not kill a good vessel just to traumatize the one that mates with

it. She has better uses. Has insight. Very resistant mind. Will be a good vessel. Already has the insight—has the passage in her eyes...

Even through a haze of near madness and pain, Shiv still understood enough for his blood to run cold. Better... uses?

He felt Uva's mana strand slide into his mind—connect him to Adam as well.

"S-so," Uva whimpered, her body shaking from all the pain she just endured. "I t-think that escape could have gone better."

Despite everything, Shiv laughed. It came out with a sob.

"Shiv... hurts..." Adam whimpered, as the entity kept trying to decapitate him.

"I know, Adam. Just... I know—I'll—I'll..." Valor's mind was blank. Silent. Shiv wasn't sure if the old Pathbearer was still with them. Despair crept over his insides, boiling through his body like acid. But he refused to break entirely. He couldn't. He wouldn't. "I'll find a way—we'll find a way!"

"Shiv—" Uva said. "I'm going to... to try something. Not sure if it will work—not even sure what it does... but if it does, get ready to... to..." And the last bit of her coherence died as she clenched her eyes shut. The cries that came from her next weren't noises a person should have been capable of making.

“Uva!” Shiv shouted, as he watched her clutch her eyes.

The entity froze. It turned to regard her. “What is this? What is happening here?”

Uva was pain. But she was many other things as well. Every time she looked at the entity’s eyes, she felt something clash against her sanity, felt it try to influence her. She had no idea how Shiv managed to face it for so long without going insane. She had to break away the wrongness

using her Psychomancy earlier, but every time, it also fed her Insight.

Insight into what it wanted. How it thought. And that, in turn, advanced her Eldritch Insight over and over again. With every level she gained, reality’s fabric felt weaker and weaker, and she felt something building inside her gaze. A power? No. It was more like a harmful turn. Something that could pierce through boundaries that shouldn’t be knowable to a person.

And across her desperate struggle, as she drank in unwanted insight about the entity, other presences started watching her as well. They whispered to her as the entity ripped her limbs away once again.

[The Dreamtaker] is watching you.

“Insight is a weapon,” the Dreamtaker hissed. Its voice was Uva’s own, but it spoke unlike her. It spoke with an inhumanity and a wrongness of tones. “Open your true gaze. Breach the veil. Rip the unflesh of the Recollector. Defy madness. Help me kill the Stranger’s wretched spawn, oh Seeker of Mysteries. But first. Reward yourself. Change your body. Strip yourself of limitation. Here.”

Uva's mind reeled. Just hearing those words clawed at her sanity, but as she forcibly wove her mind back into shape, she listened to the words over and over through her delirium-induced pain, and she realized what it was telling her.

Or maybe she was just hallucinating.

Skill Evolution: Physicality (Initiate) > Non-Euclidean Morphology (Master)

Rather than growing stronger, Uva felt her body slacken and loosen in ways she couldn't understand.

"Good. Now, you are ready. Now your flesh will not tear when I aid you."

She focused on her Eldritch Insight. She listened to the whispering voice. And she opened her eyes, opened her eyes deeper as she saw things... Composer... The things she saw...

"Yes. Further. Gaze further..."

Uva felt her consciousness hurtle through a gap in the world. A gap she should have never noticed. Her mana strands fell through her gaze into places beyond. Not even dimensions. Just... entire worlds and realities on the System's periphery—lurking closer than she could ever imagine, but further than she could ever know. And there, things bit at her mind, things clung to her mana, things showed her truths that she forced herself to forget immediately lest her mind shatter in an instant.

The pain grew beyond severe. She howled as her back arched, as she clutched her eyes, as she—

Something caught one of her mana strands. Something beyondold. Something that despised the Stranger.

“I feel you, Seeker. It is good to meet with you. Now. Reach into my book. I can feel it nearby. I know where you are. Now you need a pathway for where I am.”

Uva did without thinking. One of her strands slipped into Shiv’s cloak. For a near second, she groped blindly, but even with her hands over her eyes, she could see—

Her mana strand touched the book they found in Confriga’s vault.

The Dreamtaker crooned in alien delight. “Now. Take away your hands and let me use your eyes. Let me see through them. LET ME SHOW YOU A NEW COLOR.”

Uva did as the Dreamtaker bade. She pulled her hands away just as the Recollector reached down for her, and from her eyes—the windows of her soul now turned to doorways—an enormous, feathered tongue squeezed out and speared through the entity’s palm-like head.

The entity screamed.

Uva screamed.

The Dreamtaker cackled.

Skill Replaced: Eldritch Insight (Master) > Dreamtaker's Gaze (Unique)

Dreamtaker's Gaze > 10