

Deathless 86

Chapter 86 (I) Eldritch

The eldritch are not necessarily evil, but they are all fundamentally alien.

Take a person accidentally stepping on an anthill. Would you consider this action evil? Likely not.

Yet, that comparison is not entirely accurate. The eldritch often understand us on some level. They comprehend us. In this sense, they are never unaware of what they are doing. They are, however, simply beyond us—at least, most of us.

They have their own interests, their fascinations, and their desires, but they are not human desires. They are greater, more expansive, and more complex than most can ever know.

But as I have said, when Pathbearers grow, they grow greater as well. They grow stronger. Eventually, if an ant is infused with enough power, if it undergoes enough metamorphoses, it does not stay a mere ant. Its former self becomes a memory, and what emerges along that long track to ascension might rival more than just the greatest of men.

It might challenge a god.

So take heart, Seeker of Mysteries. If you have embarked on this path, know that despair is only a flavor and madness is but a temporary ailment. We are not the ones that break.

If you are here, if you are reading this, know this: to descend into madness or to rise and comprehend enlightenment is a factor of power, a measure of how well you wield your own mind. And that is your responsibility, your mastery.

Embrace the strange. Face it. And do not be broken.

-Seekers of the Elder Mysteries

Shiv's eyes widened in horror and disbelief as he watched something shoot out from Uva's right eye. It pierced clean through the entity, spearing its head-hand and wrapping around it like a serpent. A serpent that promptly ignited and burned the entity's very body.

The colors of the flame hurt Shiv's sanity to behold, and he watched as the entity coiled all its retroactive rivers in on itself.

"No! No!" the entity cried out. "Why, why are you here? How can YOU be here?!"

"I was always here," another voice spoke. This one held Uva's tone, Uva's tenor, Uva's pitch. But every syllable it spoke sounded jumbled, garbled, wrong. The strangely colored flame lining the serpent consumed the entity, and something began to tear it apart.

A battle was unfolding before Shiv, and sections of the entity went missing. It died, it returned to life, but then it died again, and immediately its focus scattered. Its rivers of retroactive time curled around its body, trying to ward off something unseen. One of the entity's tendrils lashed out then and crashed down on Uva.

Shiv gave a hoarse cry of terror.

When the tendril rose, Shiv's insides twisted in agony. She was flat. Pressed into the ground. Her armor was completely cracked open, and Shiv thought she was dead. But then he noticed a very strange lack of blood, and how she resembled a deflated balloon rather than a gory smear. That, and his Biomancy could still sense her organs and body architecture. She was alive, just... flat. And barely conscious.

"Uva," Shiv said, casting a thought at her. She let out a slight moan, confirming that she was truly alive, but her mind, he never felt her mind this jumbled and chaotic before.

"Shiv... I don't—I..."

"I don't know what you did, but I think you just saved all of us."

An incoherent noise came from her. And then a tentacle crashed against her again. Shiv flinched. But as it rose, Uva's armor was badly cracked while she was pasted against the floor. Still alive. Utterly unharmed.

Shiv blinked. I'm not even going to question it. Go shit yourself, System. But thank you for whatever Skill Evolution you gave her.

Shiv cast a Woundeater into himself, fixing his broken body as he shot back to his feet. Beside him, Adam was huddled on the ground, clutching his throat, shivering. "Adam, Adam, we need to go. Adam!"

The Young Lord gawked at Shiv, his eyes wide, and he looked more shell-shocked than ever. Shiv didn't have Uva's Psychomancy capabilities. He couldn't put Adam's broken thoughts back together, pull him out of a state of shock. But thankfully, he didn't need to.

The Young Lord clenched his jaw, and with what seemed like an impossible effort of will, he began to force himself to breathe, to stop hyperventilating. He stared at Valor and started gathering his scattered pieces. Shiv couldn't tell if Valor was dead or not, but the ancient's skull was badly cracked.

Just then, the entity flew overhead with a shriek, and the flames consuming it flickered, flashed, and finally burst into dust. Whatever it was fighting had just been slain, but the entity continued writhing in pain for a moment.

Shiv clenched his teeth, and he placed a hand on Adam's shoulder. "The plan stays the same, but get the others out of here and jump from somewhere they can't see! Somewhere the entity won't be able to find. Go! Go now!"

"Shiv," Adam said, breathing hard. "I—We have to run! We all have to run!"

"We're out of options, and I'm the only one that can keep this thing at bay." He shook the Young Lord affectionately. "And you're the one with the grand plans. See if you can come up with one. There's nowhere to go. And we're not leaving the survivors. And I'm not turning from a fight. Here. Take Uva."

Shiv handed Uva to Adam, and the Young Lord's eyes blinked rapidly as he stared down at the Umbral, now a little more than a completely flat sheet of flesh. "What in the Broken Moon happened to her?"

Shiv didn't wait for Adam to respond. He burst up into the air, and he slammed into the entity's back before it could recover. With another hard yank on his field, he sent both of them tumbling toward the horizon. And this time, he made some adjustments to how he fought.

He punted the entity, sending it even further into the distance. As it tried to jump back in time using its retroactive rivers. Shiv briefly halted time as his temporal shell flared. He intercepted the entity as it skipped backward in time, appeared where it had been three seconds ago. As soon as it finished its transition, Shiv smashed into it again—and even faster this time with all the momentum he had built up.

The entity shot across the sky as Shiv chuckled it with a loud shout. The moment the Chronomancy river connected to its body went anywhere near him, Shiv released his temporal shell and let his Chronomancy recover. "Hit and run," he said to himself. "Hit and run."

Strider of the Unbending Path > 103

Momentum Core > 92

The entity turned and regarded him. "Anomaly. Don't know how she contacted the Dreamtaker. Will tear the information out from her mind. Will take her eyes, replace them with my own. Vessel belongs to me. To the Stranger."

Shiv growled as shot toward the entity again. And he watched how it reacted. His last engagement against it went bad because he fought too aggressively—stayed too close. He only had ten seconds of near frozen time. Ten seconds and not a lot of maneuverability while time was frozen. New rules: if he was going to halt time, he was going to do it close. For other instances, he would just keep time drastically slowed and alternate that with Outside Context Problem.

The entity blasted toward Shiv. His temporal shell hardened but didn't completely solidify. Time slowed. The entity went from impossibly fast to being something Shiv could handle. He dove under two lashing Chronomantic rivers and pulled himself along a spearing tentacle. He slammed knee-first in the entity, scattering its proximal bubble of protective Chronomancy as he knocked it back.

Another of its tentacle stabbed at him from behind. He went outside of context. It simply passed through the space he'd just existed. "What is this?"

Shiv formed two laceration spells and unleashed them on the entity. It came apart. Shiv emerged in a burst of white and red. The entity saw him again. He paused time. He drove an elbow into the entity's chest and drained its vitality. His Momentum Core was almost full. He let time resume.

Three seconds. Temporal shell barely damaged. It should recover faster this way.

Rivers of retroactivity cascaded towards him. He went outside context again. The entity lost track of him. He passed through the entity. He fired another laceration into the back of its body. It split in half. He froze time again and pulled a bone dagger out of his cloak to replace his kukri. Then, Shiv discharged the entirety of his Momentum Core as he slashed the entity. It split in half and respawned. He slashed it again and again. He killed it four times before the first crack appeared on his temporal armor.

Then he shifted out of context again.

With each blow, a battle rage built within Shiv. Images flashed through his head. Images of Valor's cracked skull, of Can Hu unresponsive, of Adam's near-death, and of Uva's screams as it dismembered her. Gods, her screams. I'm gonna... I'm gonna tear this felling thing apart!

Something exploded inside Shiv as he let the anger take hold and guide him.

Skill Gained: Berserk (Adept)

Berserk > 1

A gate-shaking roar exploded out of Shiv as he clenched his fists as his body rippled with power. He dosed his Berserk skill with his incredible rage, and his muscle mass swelled twice over. Two retroactive rivers smashed against him. They broke against his Strider of the Unbending Path, chipping more of his Chronomantic protection away. But the entity was unprepared for the change Shiv just experienced. It launched a tendril at him, but he caught with a snarl. He yanked the entity into him and headbutted it. It snapped back—but he seized it by the midriff and powerbombed it down through a bridge, into the molten river and bedrock of Gate Theborn in less than a second.

Gravitic Wrestler > 127

A massive explosion shook the world. Molten rivers were flung high into the air, but Shiv kept going. He drove the entity deeper into the ground, the floor beneath him cracking more and more. Shiv drove it deeper and deeper into the shattering ground as he raged. He poured more of his anger into Berserk, and his physical abilities climbed to impossible heights. Every elbow, knee, and slam he formed combusted the surrounding air and sent earthquakes rushing through Gate Theborn.

The entity died over and over, and just as it was about to smash into him with another retroactive river and break his temporal armor, Shiv's mind cleared. He triggered his Outside Context Problem again and dashed out of the way, leaving the entity confused.

He created some distance, pulling away despite every fiber of his being screaming for him to continue the fight.

It staggered in place, confused. Then, the entity paused. It looked around and sent a few of its rivers sweeping through a nearby descending tower. Shiv watched some of its echoing bodies splashed into the building, utterly obliterating it. When the echoes emerged from the rubble, they clutched people in their hands. Slaves, residents, Umbrals, humans, automata, it didn't matter. Then the entity's chrono-echoes planted the people against their head-palms and absorbed them. The people vanished into the swirling darkness at the heart of the entity's head-palm. The rivers comprising its unnatural Chronomancy expanded back to their prime conditions, as more echoes emerged with each life consumed.

Shiv's eyes widened as a chill ran through him—and it wasn't just his fading vitality.

Now he understood how the entity regenerated so fast, how it restored the echoes it lost. It was eating time. It was drinking time out of people. Shiv's Strider of the Unbending Path restored as he stayed in unaltered present. The entity couldn't do that. Shiv guessed it didn't even exist under the same rules of time as he did.

I need to kill this thing. No matter what. No matter what! If I don't, it's going to eat this gate clean. And what would happen if it left? What would happen if it went to Weave or somewhere else?

But still, Shiv heard Adam's imagined voice echoing in the back of his head. Precision. Focus. Don't just strike blind.

Be effective. Strike where you need to. Only where you need to, Uva echoed right after.

Even without them there, parts of their influence still remained. And Shiv was a greater warrior than he was before, even alone. He let out a breath. He let his rage build and prepared for his next instance of Berserk. There would be a time to unleash his fury. And he would choose when that time was. He would choose how he was going to act. And when he wanted to die.

And he was going to die a lot against this thing. But it would be on his terms. To keep the damn bastard confused. Until he finally won—however long that took—or until the others figured something out.

Just as the entity flew out to claim more prey, he barreled into its back and drove a blade through its gut while draining its vitality. Its rivers smashed inwards, trying to cage him. Shiv halted time. And as soon as his vitality was restored and his Momentum Core was filled, Shiv poured every bit of anger he had into his Berserk Skill again as he recalled what this thing did to those precious to him. He reared back his fist and gritted his teeth. "You should have stayed inside that sword!"

And then he hit it so hard, its body disintegrated. His Momentum Core exploded more than it discharged. A shockwave swept out for kilometers as a massive crater formed on the floor of Gate Theborn.

Shiv's Berserk died as he spent all his anger. And there was a good synergy between Feat and skill. With his Master of Rage Feat, Berserk was simply another magnifier for his already colossal physical skills that he could trigger at a whim without being consumed by lingering rage.

His anger built. He spent it strategically. Effectively. Precisely.

Berserk > 3

Chapter 86 (II) Eldritch

As he prepared to continue his offensive, every single echo the entity had snapped a glare at him. They gazed scornfully as he froze time beyond him from their retroactive past. "I see now. You're not a person. Not a person at all. Lies, deception. You are an agent. All of you, agents of the Dreamtaker. Sent here to bring down the gate to lure me out. All this planned to spite the Stranger. Won't let you succeed. The master must cross over. The master must arrive. This world is promised."

And then each of the echoes began to shudder. Shiv wasn't sure what this damn thing was doing, but by now it surprised him enough that he wasn't about to risk anything.

He triggered Outside Context Problem again and vanished.

The entity lost track of him. But it didn't stop what it was doing. A loud note of discordant confusion sang through the world, and it felt like someone was grinding a nail through Shiv's inner brain mass. His eyes rolled, and beside him, Rose screamed, wailing in agony as she tried to claw at her eyes. She was composed of his Vitae, though, so nothing really happened. It was strange how much more affected Adam and Rose were compared to him. Uva and Valor were practically the only people to endure better than he did.

As he got some distance from the enemy, he let time resume and allowed his cracked temporal shell to heal. He took in a few quick breaths and observed his adversary, watching them to see what they were going to do. A second later, an entire river crashed back into the entity. Every echo within that river slotted over the entity's original form, superimposing again and again and again until they all vanished.

Just then, the entity bent inward, driving a hand into its palm-shaped head. And as its fingers descended the spiral lining the center of the palm, it extracted a gleaming blade that seemed to be an exact replica of Absence.

At the same time, the entity itself began to transform. Hands burst out from its tentacles, each one groping at the air, writhing and grasping for nothing in particular. Its body swelled. New eyes opened along its ribs, eyes that blinked and glared; eyes that flared with golden brilliance. Behind, the original form of the entity—the colossal creature made from fingers, eyes, and the large ten-fingered hand—briefly flickered and vanished. The other retroactive rivers were shortening now as well, actively being consumed by the entity to power this change.

Uneasiness gripped Shiv. He approached it carefully, just as his body grew a little too cold, and he rematerialized back into the real world. He also finally remembered to reactivate his Silhouette, and—

The entity blinked across time. It appeared beside him and slashed—but it slashed too wide.

A colossal wave of force swept through the world, rushing forward across the entirety of the gate's underside as an invisible tide. Then, the entity blasted through him. It had become so fast, so impossibly strong, that Shiv couldn't even react to his own beheading.

Momentum Core > 94

Adamantine Adaption > 131

Woundeater > 79

Silhouette > 91

Gravitic Wrestler > 129

Strider of the Unbending Path > 108

Outside Context Problem > 58

He felt like a Pathless facing a Pathbearer. As his head toppled off his body, the entity reached out and crushed his skull. Not even adaptive adamantine denied it for long. The new eyes lining its body snapped about, blinking, constantly blinking, always glaring. And after a moment, they narrowed in on Shiv and squinted. "Found you..."

Shit.

He immediately froze time. But as he solidified his temporal shell and halted, the eyes remained on him. Beams of accelerated time blasted his temporal shell apart in an instant. Suddenly, time surged. Shiv felt displaced. He grew impossibly cold. Right then, he very well should have died. Would have died if not for the entity misunderstanding what he was.

"Think you can deceive my perception? Can still see you! Sense you!" It swung its blade through him. The cut was so fast, a firestorm ignited around the entity, and it unleashed a blade of wind that just kept traveling behind Shiv, slashing through the very earth beneath them, splitting the molten rivers until there was a chasm four kilometers long. Shiv reached out, draining the entity. It was still accelerating his passage of time, not allowing his Chronomancy mana a chance to regenerate.

Instinctively, Shiv activated his Outside Context Problem just as he resurrected. Instead of taking several seconds, it was instantaneous. The entity's temporal eye-beams also accelerated his vitality drain and resurrection process, and it nearly accelerated him back to an early death as it cleaved out to kill him again.

Once more, it was confused, but the eyes were looking around, blinking, searching, until somehow, they faintly tracked where he generally was. "How the hell is it doing that now?" Shiv asked. "I'm acausal right now. How is it doing that?"

"Feels, feels wrong, feels wrong," the entity cried. Its voice was melodic, like a series of instruments. Shiv thought it was a bit similar to the old jazz band that once played at the Swan-Eating Toad, especially the saxophone. The very notes it hit briefly shattered his focus.

In the second it took for him to grow colder, he studied the eyes and felt their flow. Earlier, they blew apart his armor. It was like a condensed beam of Chronomancy.

It was accelerating me, Shiv realized, into the future unnaturally fast... Before the present was done. And then he understood something about Chronomancy and time. The present was the only natural time period. Anything but the present was unnatural. Anything but the present demanded mana.

Shiv's Chronomancy Skill Evolution worked in a strange way. He couldn't quite project his Chronomancy like Sullain or this entity did, but he was shrouded in a perpetual present that insulated him from outside time. It allowed him to keep to his own temporal pacing, so long as his Strider of the Unbending Path remained intact. The entity, though, didn't seem to be grounded in the present. No, its Chronomancy was rooted in several pasts.

If Shiv was a temporal fortress, this thing... He didn't have words to describe what it was. It was a felling nightmare. It didn't make sense. And now, it could accelerate him into the future with its new eyes. Godsdammit...

He emerged once more, a detonation of white, red, and he exploded forth as he tried to drive a fist into its face. It responded immediately—somehow predicting exactly where he was going to be. Once more, it beheaded him. Once more, he died.

Strider of the Unbending Path > 112

Adamantine Adaption > 134

Silhouette > 93

He reached out, draining it. He exploited its time accelerating beams so that he could restore himself to life. As soon as he resurrected, he went outside context again. But this time, he got very close to his adversary.

It's got some kind of precognition now too. I need to make this messier. He seized the entity with his field and flung it downward. He managed to push it 10 meters before its tendrils spread out. It felt like they were clutching reality. The entity didn't so much fly as it swung, clinging to sections of nothing and launching itself. Slowly, it regarded him with its many eyes. "See you now."

Shiv cursed as he shifted back into his Vitae again. It cut out and sliced nothing. He cast two lacerations at the entity. He expected it to come apart and expend two of its echoes with each death. It didn't. His

lacerations crashed against a shroud of Magical Resistance. Okay, what the fuck? Shiv thought. It didn't have that before.

Shiv tried to freeze time, but its golden eyes swung around its body and glared at him. His temporal armor burst. The entity caught him by the throat and choke-slammed him back up through the underside of an entire plaza. He swung at the entity. It jolted back in time as it swapped positions with one of his echoes. Then it did again and again until it was darting all around Shiv, moving too chaotically for him to track.

He prepared to shift out of context again. It let out a piercing note that drilled into his mind and tore his senses apart. Before Shiv could recover, it drove a tentacle into the back of his head. The world spun and danced in Shiv's vision as he felt himself crash through wall after wall. As he blasted out through another building, body slick with blood and dust, he slid to a halt along a bridge, and the entity slammed down just a few meters away from him.

Shiv wheezed. His skull felt all sorts of swollen. Cracked. The entity walked right up to him, and he spat blood on its foot. As he tried to rise, it reached down and clutched the back of his neck. He struck at its elbow, but it shrieked at him again, and pain exploded in Shiv's skull. It wasn't a natural psionic attack, but simply a noise that a human couldn't possibly take.

It took him by his limbs using its tendrils, and Shiv cried out as it pulled him in four directions at once.

"I am sure you have died now. None of that is a trick of time. None of that is Chronomancy, what your people call the alteration of time. You are not altering time. You are altering death. How? No more to existence. Existing change after death. How are you still alive?"

Shiv spat at the entity. "Come and find out, asshole. Let's play a game. I'll kill myself, and you'll kill yourself. See who doesn't come back after a thousand times. Winner gets to shit on the loser's corpse. Loser stays dead."

The entity observed him for a while longer, nodded, and then drove its sword through his chest. Shiv howled. The sword began to sap at him, drinking from his very soul. But his soul wouldn't let go. It was lodged in his vitality. But it still felt like someone was flaying him from the inside. When Shiv thought crashing in the necromantic rift might have been the worst pain in his life, he was wrong. This was on another level of suffering, and it was constant.

Every cut the blade inflicted on him tore at his skills and mana. But his soul just wouldn't let go. Shiv remembered Confriga dissolving Pathbearers with his blade. This wasn't a sword that looked like Absence.

This was Absence.

It was Absence without the entity hiding within. And now it was using the original blade on him.

Shiv tried to stop screaming, tried to keep his wailing under control, but the pain... But what about the pain?

he thought internally. He slammed his jaw shut, and he just glared at the entity as it cut him. He wrestled against it. He summoned his rage, and once more, his Berserk activated. Shiv poured everything into it, channeling anger into the skill as he tore free from the entity's grip. The blade got stuck in his flesh as his Toughness spiked. He booted the entity back and ripped Absence out of his body before casting it aside.

He tackled the entity through the floor and back down into the bottom of the gate again. A blast shook all of Gate Theborn. But the entity blasted him with its temporal accelerating gaze, and suddenly, Shiv found himself displaced—

Something crashed hard into his skull.

The world went white. Then, Shiv woke screaming as the entity drove its blade into him again. He tried to fight it, but it wouldn't stop singing that noise that clawed at his mind...

"Now. Die for good." It was like an owner chastising its dog, but Shiv simply spat on the blade, and then he spat on the entity again.

He could feel his lifeblood leaking out from him, but he simply managed a bloody sneer. "I'll be seeing you soon again, you piece of shi—"

Every single one of the entity's echoes screamed. Their eyes opened, and a noise, a noise that lashed at Shiv's very capability to think, consumed the gate. A spike of pain swept through Shiv, hammering down into the base of his skull. Something inside his memories shattered. His mind began to unravel.

"Ah. Identified weakness. Memetic resonance. Sound. Cannot process. Here. Have more."

And it grew louder as Shiv experienced the first true seizure of his life. He gagged and twitched on the ground. His eyes rolled within his skull, and he tried to fight it off, but the noise.

System... make it stop...

Then, briefly, it did. Shiv sucked in a gasping breath. His mind was in tatters. That wasn't like any kind of Psychomancy he experienced. This was breaking him on another level. Breaking everything. His bones were fracturing from the noise itself.

"Stop—stop singing," Shiv gasped. "It's... Your singing's so shit... It's like an... anti-skill." He couldn't help it.

The entity gripped him by his neck. Shiv struggled, but he had a hard time even remembering what his own name was. "Going to take some time taking you apart. Learning. Understanding. Cannot see your history. Cannot see your fated death. Wrong. Wrong! WRONG!"

It bent down and clutched his face with its hand-head, and it began to suck him into the vortex at the palm's core. Shiv screamed and gurgled. The entity pulled harder and harder. He caught a glimpse of a place—colors he couldn't describe—creatures that—shapes—his mind couldn't process what—

Shiv howled in agony. He gripped the fingers comprising the entity's face, and he pulled with all his strength. One cracked, the other barely twisted. The entity drove a fist into his stomach, and Shiv vomited into the vortex at the entity's palm.

"If body won't die, if you won't stay dead, then mind will break. Will see you if you can become vessel instead. No insight. Hard mind. Regenerating mind. Regenerating soul. Can break over and over and over. Will break over and over. But won't die. Won't stay dead. See now with future-gazing. See. You are an abomination. Cannot let you endure. Cannot feed your nature."

“F-fuck you,” Shiv grunted. He tried prying himself out from the entity’s grasp, but it just tightened its grasp. Then, something slipped out from inside the creature’s palm. Strands of unnatural radiance bled from its many eyes, and they splashed against Shiv’s face, burrowed into his wounds. Shiv struggled, but the song it sang grew louder and louder, and blood vessels burst inside his head. Shiv’s eyes rolled. And then something clawed its way in under his eyelids as well.

More things emerged from the entity and pushed their way into Shiv’s broken body, into his broken mind.

“We will see now. See how long it takes for you to empty, break, shatter, be worn.” And the entity’s hand-shaped head made a twitching gesture, and the creatures that the entity deposited inside Shiv began to sing a torturous symphony from within his flesh.

On that day, everyone within Gate Theborn discovered just how loud one who didn’t fear pain could scream.

Chapter 87 (I) Companions [I]

There’s going to be a time when you want to kneel. There’s going to be a time when you’re so badly beaten and shaken, you want nothing more than just to give up. You’ll be so tired that you’ll do anything to take a final gasp of breath. You’ll lift your visor and take an arrow to the eye just to get a lung full of air. There will be a time when every muscle fiber in your body is spent, when you have nothing left, when your magic is completely strained.

In these times, you’re going to look at the people beside you. You’re going to see the same expression on their faces, and they’ll see it on yours, and in that moment, something special will happen. The special thing is that you’re either going to turn—you’re gonna face the enemy, you’re gonna die doing it because you can’t let them down. You can’t let your war-kin down. Or you’re all going to break. You’re gonna break together, and that’ll be it.

But I don't see people who break in this course. I've been hard on you. I've tried to treat you like soldiers, like real field soldiers, but it's not something that anyone can easily teach. It's not something you just become through some practice and mock battles. But I'll tell you this much, over the course of the year, I've seen you grow. Some of you from incompetent to decent Pathbearers, some of you from reckless to focused and disciplined, some of you go from ignorant to well-rounded and aware. Growth, growth, and the willingness to learn from each other, that's why you're gonna fight.

I won't bullshit you, it's going to hurt. When this moment comes, when that breaking point comes, it's gonna hurt. But I've seen you at the breaking point over and over again. If you didn't fold here, I don't think you're gonna fold later. But hold on to this. Hold on to the feeling, hold on to the expression on your comrade's face, and know that you are fighting for more than yourself, always.

You're all good kids. I can't promise how long you'll all live. But I can promise you won't go to the grave hating yourselves, thinking that you ran.

-Captain Harry Irons, TacStrat 101, Phoenix Academy

Uva woke from the grip of a torturous nightmare with a cry of terror. She couldn't remember what she was dreaming about. Her mind felt raw and ravaged. Her body felt loose and limp and—

It was then Uva realized she didn't just feel that way; her body was flat and thin as a silken bedsheet. The Umbral Psychomancer's mind reeled. Memories hammered back into her. Of the entity, of Shiv, and of the voice that whispered to her in their moment of absolute desperation. A voice that she could still hear murmuring inside her ears, with its power nested within her very flesh. But there was another noise as well: ragged gasps. Someone was trying to stop sobbing. Adam!

Uva's insides popped as she forced herself to inflate. For a beat, she didn't know if she could, but her body responded to her, remembering the exact shape and dimensions she used to have. As she

returned to her original state, Uva felt the uncanny changes brought upon her by her Master-Tier Physicality Skill Evolution. It felt like she had a strange level of control over every part of her body, and that she could twist and reshape herself at a whim. She tried doing that on instinct, and she managed to overinflate her head to an absurd degree. The damaged remnants of the armor around her neck felt tight, but it didn't impede her breathing either.

What in the Composer's infinite majesty did I just get from this thing?

Non-Euclidean Morphology > 101

With a brief effort, Uva returned to her original state and pinched her flesh. Her skin and body felt the same as before. Yet, with a flex of her new "muscles," she managed to turn her head backward like an owl—even twist it and sink it into her body. The control she had over her shape now was uncanny. She could bend and deform in ways that would cripple or kill most other people without any difficulty.

Uva stared down at herself. Her arms and legs were exposed in places. Her chestplate was cracked, and her Arachnae Order uniform was exposed between the gaps. She looked around and found herself inside the teleportation anchor they used as their base of operations.

Leu,

Uva thought with a grimace. She saw the Guardshead die. It was so sudden, brutal, and unnatural that none of them could have done anything. The thing that took over Confriga had killed her in an instant. And that filled her with a cold dread. Shiv.... Shiv is still fighting the—

And then she heard him. Shiv was screaming. There was so much pain in his cries that she choked. Her body tensed with trauma and discomfort, but she clamped her emotions down using a mana strand before they could compromise her rational thinking. They couldn't afford that right now—she didn't

have time to be traumatized, she needed to get back into the fight. They all needed to get back in the fight. Shiv was buying time for them. Now, they needed to make it worth it.

“Stop—stopstop, please, I can’t—just stop please...” Uva turned and found Adam clutching his head, whimpering to himself. He was openly sobbing, and his mind—Composer, his mind was in a wretched state. She cast one of her Psychomancy threads into him and let out a moan of sympathetic pain. If she was traumatized, Adam was near the point of insanity due to exposure to the entity. It had torn his mind to pieces. Uva had rescued slaves who endured unspeakable tortures at the hands of the First Blood, and most of them weren’t nearly as psychologically wounded as Adam.

A roar sounded from Shiv. Followed by a heavy impact. But the wretched screaming didn’t stop. Uva sealed away another portion of her mind. She didn’t want to know what the entity was doing to him—she refused to know. Uva would do everything she could to mend his mind after. If they won this fight. We need to win this fight.

Valor lay scattered across the ground beside Can Hu, the Legend’s ghostly silhouette gone. Both of them were unresponsive. Overhead, the Graven Cage containing the Animancy Core crackled quietly in the dim ambiance. The Aviary owl, meanwhile, was listening. She immediately made the spy go to sleep before doing anything else.

“Adam,” Uva said as she worked on his memories. The damage he’d sustained was severe, but the good thing was that she knew the source. She sealed away a good portion of his near-term memories—every glimpse and gaze he laid on the entity. It horrified her to realize that his Magical Resistance didn’t protect him at all, but then again, this entity wasn’t exactly magic. It was... wrong.

“What is magic?” something with Uva’s own voice said, its presence lurking within her very sight. “Your magic is given by the System. A reshaping of what is. Synthesis. Regeneration of patterns. And no more. You have not perceived true novelties and creations. We are beyond the pattern. We are above it. And so it hurts you to behold us.”

“Dreamtaker,” Uva said, clenching her teeth. She used her Psychomancy to replace her utter terror with cold fury as best she could. “Why did you aid me? What do you want?”

“To see you flourish, Seeker of Eldest Mysteries. You are... so enduringly sane. So much control and understanding of how to maintain your own mental architecture. Mind is laced with cold focus, hiding warmth and loss and want and so much more. There are so many things we can show each other. So much love to exchange.”

Despite everything, Uva scoffed silently. “Love? I am unavailable. I am courting someone else right now, and have little interest in expanding my desires.”

“Yes... The unbreaking one... No. Wrong. He breaks. But he restores. He returns. He mends and endures. Does not stay broken. Self-bearing pillar. Strange soul. I considered him when he touched my book. An unyielding vessel would have been useful, but he is rigid. Brutal. Not an architect. Not a mind-dancer with the precision of a seamstress.”

“U-Uva?” Adam gasped as Uva quarantined the last of the malignant memories. She knelt down beside him, examining his face. “I thought—I thought you were...” He slammed into her, holding her in a desperate embrace as he shuddered.

Uva reciprocated and tightened her hold as another deafening bellow sounded from above.

She wouldn’t think about what the entity was doing to Shiv. She wouldn’t.

After a moment of comfort, she broke the hug, pushing Adam back and making him look at her. His expression remained wretched. Shame and self-loathing burned inside his mind, and he couldn't meet her gaze.

"This one... So sweet. So broken. He wouldn't do at all. A pity. But perhaps a fine outcome. I feel the touch of the Starhawk radiating from his soul. To claim him would have demanded much."

Uva ignored the Dreamtaker as Adam whispered. "I... I ran. I left him. I left him behind with that... thing."

"Adam," Uva said, her voice firm but gentle. "I need you to focus. Shiv told us what he was planning. Now, we make use of the time he bought for us. We find a way to kill that thing and help Shiv."

"Kill that thing?" Adam hissed. "Can it even be killed? It—I don't even know what it did—how it did. There was nothing we could do! Nothing!" He clutched his throat and swallowed. "I still—I can still feel it pulling at my head. My bones—Shiv saved me... And I just left him with that thing."

"Adam!" Uva snapped. She jolted his mind with a surge of Psychomancy and drew his focus to her. "I know. I know. The feelings you have are not wrong. But you are not wielding them right. I need you to focus. I need you to stand with me and come up with a strategy."

"I don't know—" Adam's face contorted in pain. "I don't... I don't know if I can face it again. I don't know. I'll—I'll need to use Seer of Horizons to study and.... I looked at it and my mind—"

"I can keep your mind together. I will." Uva swallowed back her own discomfort. "It will be painful. But I will not let you go mad. Do you trust me?"

Adam hesitated, and he looked at her. For a long, hard moment, he just studied her. “Yes. More than I trust even myself right now.”

“And I feel the same,” Uva said. “I cannot do what you do. I cannot watch the entity from afar, and I don’t—I don’t know what to do either. But together, maybe—” At another guttural scream of anguish, Uva closed her eyes and forced herself not to think about the torture being inflicted on Shiv. “Together we can do this. We have to. He needs us. Please. I cannot save him alone.”

Uva’s eyes were a kaleidoscope of colors. Mesmerizing colors. Strange colors. Colors Adam couldn’t comprehend. But as a single tear rolled down her right eye, Adam fought his way through the terror that gripped him.

The entity... Even with its appearance and the things it did to him repressed by Uva, just thinking about it made Adam want to break down and run, to renounce ever being a Pathbearer and retreat into seclusion. How could such a thing exist? And how could he be so helpless, so hopeless against it? And how could he call himself a Pathbearer now that he had abandoned his brother-in-arms?

And through it all, the System was mocking him. It was mocking all of them. It made Shiv the only one capable of confronting the entity head-on by granting him Chronomancy. But he couldn’t beat it alone. It gave Uva—the only one among them with the psychological capacity to resist the entity’s aberrant nature—the ability to physically resist it, but she still couldn’t reach it or affect its Chronomancy-guarded mind. And Adam... He felt useless. He felt hopeless. And a searing rage boiled inside his gut as he finally regained enough coherence to look at his newest notifications.

Select a Skill to Evolve to Master-Tier

Bowslinger > 96

Wings of the Starhawk > 98

Seer of Horizons > 115

Veilpiercer > 109

Tactical Overseer > 81

Skill Gained: Divination 1 (Adept)

Skill Gained: Necromancy 1 (Adept)

He remembered when he got the skill. The skill he always wanted so badly. He was trying to get the thing to stop hitting Shiv. Adam strained his Awareness as hard as he could, guessing where the entity might be as he pulled at his bow over and over, his vambrace crackling like never before—but all of his fucking arrows just vanished from existence. And then something was tearing him apart again. He remembered... He remembered the cold touch of death again. For a few moments, he drifted close to the edge. That place of no return.

Uva's magic tightened around his mind and stopped him from collapsing into a panic attack, but Adam still dry heaved.

And now, every few seconds, the entity was hurting Shiv. Gods, the screams. Make it stop. Make... Adam managed to control himself before he began another despair spiral. I have to make it stop. I need to go back for him. There's no one else but me and Uva. Valor... Can Hu... I don't even know if they're still alive.

The ancient Pathbearer's skull was cracked and leaking some kind of magic. Can Hu's body constantly whined from the damage it had sustained.

It was just him and Uva.

He stared at his skill notifications and drew in a long, ragged breath. "It's just a bastard."

"What?" Uva said.

"The System. Do you think it enjoys this? Enjoys our pain and misery?" She didn't have an answer. Adam continued. "Divination. I got the Divination Skill. Right now. All my life, I wanted... It was something that my mother had. I wanted to have something like what she had. And now. It gives this to me now." Adam laughed bitterly. "It's like being skinned alive and then being handed the knife with the handle towards you. It's sculpting us. Or hoping that we die. And the Necromancy. Why..."

But Adam knew why. The System rarely did something without reason. Everything was to facilitate more struggle, death, and toil. Slowly, he turned to regard the Graven Cage drifting above him, then gazed toward the distant center of the gate, where the portal to Vulketh swirled, and he remembered an alternative plan they had discussed.

There were risks to it, but it probably would have worked without fully destabilizing the gate, as the blast would be contained within another dimension. And with that thought, the beginnings of a desperate plan began to form in Adam's mind. "The Animancy Core," he gasped. He was still raw of mind and broken of spirit, but there was a direction now. A fragile strand of hope against the uncanny creature they were fighting. "If... We can kill it. Or at least make it a god's problem. We need to get the core across to Vulketh, then lure the entity through at the same time. And then we detonate it. I'll find a way to destabilize a cage. Somehow. I... Godsdamn the System, this is why it gave me Necromancy. So I can do this. So I can examine how to do this without Valor. I'm sure of it..."

Uva went quiet as she stared at the core. He could feel her plucking at his memories, studying his thoughts.

"I don't know if it can work," Adam admitted. "I don't know if anything can kill this thing. I barely understand anything about the entity, but it is the only thing I can think of. Nothing we do has even affected it. Shiv is the only one that managed to hurt it, and now—"

Shiv howled out again, and the pain carried by his voice was even more severe than previously.

Adam clamped his hands against his ears as Shiv grew silent again, but Uva's grimacing expression nearly sent him into another spiral. She was right. There was no more time for this self-loathing misery bullshit. They needed to come up with something and do it right now.

Maybe Shiv could endure the torture, but Adam wasn't going to be able to stay sane if he kept hearing those screams.

"We—shit!" Adam snarled. "I had Shiv drop the obsidian tower on the third gateway. It's blocked. We'll need to get that opened again. I—we need to make sure the cage is in position. The other side is nothing but a sea of molten metal—aside from the extended elevator shaft. I'll need to see if we can hide the cage there. But we need to get the entity there somehow. We still need Shiv. He is the only one that can pin it—who can physically contend with its strength and Chronomancy long enough. We need to save him from this bloody thing first, but... but how?"

And then, a voice sounded out from Uva—but she wasn't speaking.

Chapter 87 (II) Companions [I]

"The bomb will not be enough," the Dreamtaker whispered within Uva. "Scorn won't take action himself, and the Recollector is a creature born from a distended, mutilated coupling between the Stranger and the concept of time. It must be slain until a single instance remains. Or it must be attacked by something like it. Something that exists across time as well..."

Uva noticed Adam's confusion, and she shifted her recent memories over to him. He reacted as if he had just been punched. "There's... there's another one of those things inside you?"

"Across," the Dreamtaker clarified. "To see is to experience is to be a pathway. And Uva, Seeker of Eldest Mysteries, has gazed far. Gazed deep. Gazed and danced into the mind of a 'lesser eldritch.' If that is the noise-name you bestow on us."

Adam paled. "What—what do you—"

"I am here to help you. I want you all to flourish and grow and continue to dance. To continue seeing out from the Seeker. A novel moment is transpiring here. A true moment unlike anything ever before. It feeds me. Feeds my dreams. I am made more with these tastes. And I can offer many things in return. Power. Blessings. Knowledge. Colors beyond your feeble imagination."

None of that meant anything to Uva right then. She only wanted one thing. "The entity. This Recollector. You can help us kill it."

"I can give you the means. I can show you things. But it must die by your hands. I reached through you earlier. I can do much more than that, but you are still building yourself, Seeker. Too much and you will crack for good, before you learn to weave the madness into enlightenment. The tragedy of losing a good mind-dancer will make those bound to me sorrow-weep. But I can give you something that is enough. Something you can tap into. Bridge that unknown and strike at the Recollector's mind. Strike across the past. I can teach you where to stare, what to see, how to call them close to your gaze."

"Them?" Uva asked, her expression grim. Her heart was trembling inside her chest, and she feared what might be asked of her. "I am to serve as your gateway again?"

"No. We are already here. But the veil is too thick and often hard. Needs someone with true insight and history-legend-magic infused inside them to breach the fabric. To bridge the pattern with the Great and Colorful Outside so long as they can maintain their mind—and serve as Beholder."

"Me," she breathed.

“Yes. Already have the gaze. Had the insight before even that. I just reached back. I fed you a color and gifted you a place—a pattern place in the wonderful chaos. I felt your potential when you didn’t break. Now, your eyes reside in my nearness. And there are many of mine, new-dreamt creations that will seek to feed on one of the Stranger’s offspring. To feed on a thing trapped in moments before. They linger close to you. And they wait. Stare. Focus your insight like before. Look into what is. And then look beyond it. Look... See us...”

Uva’s eyes flared with colors beyond her expression. Beautiful colors. Incredible colors. Colors that lashed and mended a mind all at once.

“Uva,” Adam breathed, “I’m not sure about—”

The lights grew brighter—became more than just light. It became a channel, and she went from being an observer to seeing through the fabric of existence, and she saw them—so many of them lurking beyond. Lurking between. There was so much that the System barely touched. All of Integrated Existence was a roiling island of burning discord, surrounded by a miasmic ocean of wonder and madness.

Something slipped into Uva’s gaze. Something crawled up through her skull, prying her irises wide and dashing through. The creature was large—should have been too large to emerge from Uva’s skull. It was five meters long and resembled multiple resolving rings. Rings that railed with grains of sand that formed what looked to be biting mouths. Rings that bore the texture and pulsed like hearts.

“What in the Ascendants...” Adam gasped as he stumbled back.

Uva’s head deformed and stretched to impossible proportions. Yet, the entity managed to crawl through. And as it did, it immediately started dissolving. It let out a pained shriek as it cried. “FEED! TIME! FEED! RECOLLECTOR! Past false! Present IS!”

And then it shot out from their teleportation anchor, rushing down the excavated tunnel to seek its quarry.

“Must warn you,” the Dreamtaker whispered. “The New-Dreamt are non-logics. They do. They act. But there is no control. They will seek the Recollector because it is of their flavor, because I have lured them. But there are a great many other things that lurk in the Great and Colorful Outside. Remember that when you open your gaze. Remember that anything can slip through. That you cry out into a wilderness. Even my knowing-eye-ear-senses can cover only so much. Be prepared. Only minor entities now. But with power comes danger and risk and more. But danger and risk and more are what you need. So gaze. Gaze! GAZE!”

And Uva cried out as she peered even deeper through the fabric of all that was.

More of those entities blasted out from her, squeezing out from her eyes. Her skull felt like jelly, and she tightened her mana strands around her mind like a fortress. Her Psychomancy rattled and strained as several of the eldritch creatures slashed at her, trying to get in. But she redirected the building madness and turned it back on them using her few unoccupied strands.

Uva stared until the madness grew too much, until her Psychomancy strands were on the verge of straining, and only when she could endure no more did she stop. As she closed her eyes, gripping her skull, she felt Adam stabilize her, and slowly she pulled her hand away from her face. Inside, the Dreamtaker laughed with greater pleasure. “Wonderful, Seeker. Wonderful. What a flexible, malleable mind. What a clever and cold focus. So good. Your System-dead-mind-soul-tyrant-magic-plague has achieved use! Connecting your potentiality with the beyond... It wants us to fight. To fight is all it wants. To struggle. To change. We like it...”

Dreamtaker's Gaze > 5

Non-Euclidean Morphology > 103

Ahead, a small army of the strange, ringed creatures squeezed down the excavator tunnel.

"You..." Adam swallowed. "That was one hundred and eight of them. Uva..."

"I'm fine," Uva said. Frankly, she felt better than fine. She felt... excited. Alive. Powerful, unlike ever before. And she felt a frigid anger building as she heard Shiv's anguished roar again. "I will be fine. Once I break the Recollector's mind." She called her shield close to her and ignored the awakened item's whimpering. "We will follow your plan. Get the Animancy Core in position. I will see if I can distract the entity and get to Shiv. I will stay connected to you and keep your mind stable. Gazing upon it will not break you like last time. I promise."

She flung her Psychomancy threads out and connected her to the alien army she just summoned. Their minds were fractured things—things of broken time that smashed hard against her sanity. It was like they were small singularities of past, present, and future—and she only had the capacity to exist in the present. So, she reduced the number of entities she was connected to and barricaded her ego from the parts she couldn't comprehend.

Cherished Sister Uva Mettabon knew how to pick her battles. More importantly, she knew how to make someone else fight her battles for her.

Adam looked down at his Spellstring, and his expression hardened. He was more terrified than he ever had been in his life. But he wasn't terrified alone. And the thing was, Adam could fight pretty well while terrified. "Right. Let's... let's see what I can do about hitting the damn entity too."

Uva blinked as Adam chose his Master-Tier Skill.

Divination didn't feel like anything at the first level. At least, Adam didn't notice anything different. But the moment he selected that as his Master-Tier Skill, an enormous sphere of pale violet expanded out from Adam, pushing out through the teleportation anchor, and going further and further beyond. Within the Divination sphere, he noticed strange distances rippling around a great many things. Things, and people. Can Hu, Uva, Valor, and even his own armor were giving off ripples. And then there were the near-transparent violet chains that connected one thing to another.

As he focused on them, the world began to speak to him. The ripples expanded and revealed to him a flood of shapes and details. Sometimes, he saw the forms of people. Other times, a burst of notifications spread across his eyes as details he had no business knowing emerged. But the information was always partial, and even actively changed at times.

Adam's jaw dropped. He knew Divination was a complicated lore of magic. He took on a good few extra courses at the Academy in the vain hope he might attune himself to the power, to become more like his mother. But strangely, this Skill Evolution allowed him to move the field around. To fully imbue it into something.

As he tested that on the Graven Cage, a massive flood of details, histories, images, and more crashed against Adam. He flinched back and cried out as his mind strained. Something inside him would have broken if not for Uva bracing his mind and helping him sift through the overload. But as Divination mana

slip into the cage, he saw Valor light up—and far, far beyond the gate, he saw a few hundred other entities light up as well.

Skill Evolution: Divination (Adept) > Mark of the Seeking Clairvoyant (Master)

Mark of the Seeking Clairvoyant > 101

He knew exactly where they were. He could feel them. He could tell their present state and the vagaries of what they did in relation to the Graven Cage. They were Silent Spinner and Beetles-Needs-Pets, as well as all the other participants in the ritual to create the cage—Necromancers from Weave. But as he tried to learn more, the sheer complexity of Divination forced him to stop.

Foreshadowing was simple. Existence just whispered things to you. It warned you. This wasn't that. This was getting into the casual patterns that made up everything, and trying to sift through the general details. Adam was woefully unprepared for that. Just like he was utterly unprepared for this fight. But there was one thing he could do now. He could infuse his Divination into the entity. And he could track the bastard wherever it emerged. Or so he hoped.

"That... is a lot... But I think... It has to be enough," Adam said. "I have to be enough."

"We will be," Uva corrected. "Whatever it takes."

He met her now ominously brilliant eyes and let out a breath. "Right. Let's... This damned thing traumatized us. Now. Let's go traumatize it back. Let's go save our bloody monster."

Pain.

Pain was a constant acquaintance of Shiv. Acquaintance because he didn't think much of pain. Sometimes, shit hurt, but he dealt with it. That was a function of his mind and his natural resilience. It was why Shiv didn't scream that much.

Now, with his mind drifting in broken fragments, he could hear himself screaming. He felt like a passenger in his own body as the things the entity dumped inside him disfigured and broke things inside him. But they just wouldn't stop. Every time his mind healed a bit more, they broke him again. Another tore at his soul, and that was worse. But it often overfed, and the entity had to pull it out from his flesh before replacing it with a new one.

Right now was one such moment. As the entity reached down, the tattered remains of Shiv's consciousness responded the only way he remembered. Aggression. Hate this asshole. Kill—

Another wave of soul-tearing pain crossed through him. Shiv blacked out. This was the best part of the torture. He got to pass out for a few moments. He knew nothing. The world was a peaceful place. But eventually, the pain would wake him back up again. Again. Over and over.

But with his building madness came something else. An indescribable rage that accumulated within Shiv like a bomb that wasn't allowed to go off. There was so much inside him that all his skills were practically rattling.

Something assumed control of his thoughts, and he healed himself again. A well-fed serpent-thing was drifting along his arm. He cast that serpent thing. It ate his wounds. Shiv blinked. He didn't know when he had regained consciousness. He was losing track of time. Hard to tell anything when everything was just pain.

The entity hung above him. Its tentacles were splayed out. Its many eyes glared at him in outrage. It clenched Absence with its right hand and balled its other into a fist. "Why... Keeps coming back together. Broke you over and over and over for so long. Why won't you go empty? Why not stay broken? How?"

Shiv clenched his teeth. He tried to get up. Then, pain exploded inside him again as the creatures hiding with his mind, soul, and flesh started ripping him apart again.

"Break!" the entity screamed down at him. Shiv somehow managed to trigger his gravitic field, and he slammed his fist into it. It stumbled back and then struck him in return. Shiv slammed back down. The entity stood over him, stomping on his head over and over. He barely noticed that. The true hell was inside him. The true hell—

He heard the entity cry out in alarm. He felt it depart—felt its presence shoot beyond the reach of his Biomancy field. But he just kept screaming. Screaming until he felt someone new push into his mind. Her mind felt horrified, sorrowful, focused, and beyond furious at the same time.

The entities inside him responded to the intruder's presence with confusion.

The intruder spoke, her every syllable filled with cold, seething hatred. "This... is not how you break someone's mind. Let me show you."

And for once, the creatures inside Shiv started screaming in anguish—writhing inside his very being as colorful lights consumed him. Lights and colors he couldn't describe. Shiv's pain faded briefly as he felt the intruder desperately reaching out, gripping his broken consciousness, and he tasted something from her.

Pain. Her pain. For what had been done to him. For how badly he suffered. And even broken, even though he was just an insane shadow of himself, Shiv tasted the first flavors of what he understood to be genuine love.

It was a sweet pain to give oneself up for those they cared about. It was sweeter yet to be saved and protected in turn.

Chapter 88 (I) Companions [II]

The world is hard. The System is a bastard. Things can get real bad. They've gotten bad for me. And if you're going to be a Pathbearer of any worth, they'll get bad for you.

And eventually, it will be too much for you. Most Pathbearers end up dead one way or another before they are driven to the breaking point, but the ones who make it past Adept... You'll do it at least once. It's why there are so many one-skill Master-Tiers in the world. It's why most choose to stop pushing so hard after a certain point.

Because the struggle sometimes is too much. Because sometimes, the System takes more than it gives by far.

I've met people I would have described as iron. Iron-willed. Iron-skinned. Iron-hearted. But even iron has a breaking point. And I watched the ones I admire die over and over. Most campaigning Pathbearers have maybe a decade or two of heavy fighting in them. After that, better find a good Psychomancer, because the trauma builds up, the people you lose build up, and the System never lets up.

No matter how strong you are, it will find a way to beat you to your knees and shatter you. But the second part to this is that you don't need to stay shattered. And you don't need to be the only one fighting for you.

The first time me and her realized we loved each other was when we wandered off into the same glade. Why the same glade? Because it looked peaceful. And because after a pretty nightmarish campaign against the godsdamned orcs—after they snuck into our camp, captured our friends, and just... The screams. I'll never forget the screams. I'll never forget the bodies...

...

My wife and I... We were in that glade because neither of us could sleep. I told her about my nightmares. She told me about hers. The pain didn't get any better immediately—that's not how it works. But you do get a bit stronger when you realize that someone else needs you not to break. And that you desperately need her not to break, either. Because if one of you falls, the other might follow.

Sometimes, broken pieces fit right together, and they can stop a true collapse from happening.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

Skill Gained: Berserk (Adept)

Berserk > 1

Dedicated mages usually didn't get the Berserk Skill. Some frontline Dynamancers or physical-enhancement Biomancers, perhaps, but they were more mixed-role combatants. Psychomancers, however, practically never gained the Berserk Skill. Practically never, because something broke inside Uva as she laid eyes on the broken, mutilated form of Shiv.

The sounds he made while the entity tortured him were inhuman—were bad enough that she had to silence a part of her own mind to stay focused. But as she commanded the Dreamtaker's eldritch spawn to swarm and tear the Recollector apart, she saw Shiv clearly for the first time, and it felt as if someone shoved a burning blade into her heart.

She knew it was going to be bad. Uva thought she was ready to face anything. She was wrong.

Shiv resembled a large sack of bloody, screaming meat more than he did a person. His body was twisted and warped in so many unnatural ways that it took all she had not to puke all over her shield.

"And so you see the inevitability of rigidity. You would have borne a similar mis-shape to his without your Physicality-power-change." The Dreamtaker's words glided across Uva's mind while dozens of the ring-shaped eldritch entities she directed vanished from her awareness, diving into the past to strike at the temporal echoes of the Recollector. She commanded a core group of ten to stay close to her—to cover her and delay the Recollector if it noticed what she was doing. She couldn't fully dive into any of their minds due to their temporal non-linearity, but she could still communicate with them while they remained in the present. And there were parts of them, like the Shoggoth, that did align with her.

Hate for one. Absolute, all-consuming hatred for the Recollector.

She used that hate to guide them. And she felt that hate overcome her self-control as she drifted over the massive crater Shiv lay in.

“AWAY! AWAY! PAST IS MINE! STOP! STOP CONSUMING MY PAST!” the Recollector roared as it spasmed and twitched in the air. Its tentacles lashed about, and it began to blink across time and space. Without Chronomancy, Uva had no ability to perceive the battle that was actually happening. But Shiv could.

And Shiv—

Uva groaned as she covered her mouth. Her horror and misery were contagious, as all the ten New-Dreamt she had guarding her began to let out vaguely human cries of anguish. Worse, there were things still inside Shiv. Things that twitched and writhed and pushed under his skin—struggling to deform his adamantine flesh. And there were other things in his mind—she could sense the mangled remains of his ego and the vermin who constantly feasted on his mind, on his very being.

A storm of cold rage consumed Uva as Berserk took hold. She lost all sense of self-control as she dove into his mind without hesitation. She found the things ripping at his sense of self. His mind was constantly mending, but the damage they inflicted... There would have been nothing left of anyone else.

These entities were without true physical form. Instead, they were contained within a series of discordant notes that crashed against her mind, that tried to inflict psychosis on her so they could slip into her cracks as well. Unfortunately for them, Uva’s sense of self was nothing but violent, unstoppable rage, and every single strand of her Psychomancy flared with hateful intent.

And through it all, there was still a cold, calculated hand directing Uva on her offensive. Still just a sliver of rationality remaining. “This... is not how you break someone’s mind. Let me show you.”

They sang at her. She drove her strands directly into them and flooded their minds with her hate. The entities grew louder from the anger she poured into them. But then they kept swelling, and the entities shrieked and wailed and ruptured into deflating notes as she overloaded them. But she didn't only use her Psychomancy. Her single thread of rationality made her breach the threshold to the Outside again. She used her psychosis as a shield against madness and unleashed the full power of her gaze. A torrent of brilliant changing colors flashed inside Shiv, and as she cast her light on the remaining entities in his body, they screamed, they tried to flee, but she drove them back into the Outside—into the Dreamtaker's domain.

There, she watched as they were mauled and devoured by other entities of even greater strangeness. Beings Uva couldn't yet comprehend. But she didn't care. She continued burning them with her glare, unleashing more and more color until her rage finally ran dry and the quiet voice within commanded her to stop.

Puppeteer of the Formless Strings > 112

Berserk > 3

Dreamtaker's Gaze > 7

Shiv's body stopped glowing. He wasn't screaming anymore, either. But his mind... "Oh, Composer. Shiv, your mind... There's no time... How am I supposed to fix you?"

He barely looked human from all the damage he'd sustained on the outside. Inside, it was even worse. But already, she could feel his mind starting to mend. The many broken pieces and badly mangled memories glided back toward each other of their own volition. A rush of hope passed into Uva. His mind regenerated. For whatever reason, his sanity and mental state always returned to a strong, stable baseline. Today, she was all too thankful for that. She moved the pieces back together as fast as she could.

Faintly, she realized two of her guards shot off to engage the Recollector—to draw its attention away and give her a chance to mend Shiv's broken consciousness.

"Work fast, Seeker," the Dreamtaker whispered. "The Recollector is cutting away pieces of itself, surrendering singular pasts to preserve the other-many-wholes. It will tear-banish-strike at the New-Dreamt. Their colors are not bright enough to delay it forever. Get the enduring one together. He will fight. It is written into him. He will fight even if there is nothing else left."

As Uva connected and wove the many fragments of Shiv back in place, she felt something from him. A reactive, intuitive warmth. A heavy, crushing happiness. The feelings drenched her Psychomancy, and she couldn't help but laugh to herself in disbelief. "You impossible brute of a man..."

Two of her New-Dreamt crossed over from present to past. A moment before they did, she felt an impact as they intercepted some of the Recollector's temporal echoes in a brutal collision.

"SEEKER! CAN SEE YOU! SEE YOUR ECHOING TRAILS IN THE PAST CAN TASTE THE DREAMTAKER'S STENCH DEEP IN YOU! WILL NOT LET THE GLUTTON-THIEF OF THOUGHTS AND HUES HAVE YOU! MINE! FOR THE STRANGER! YOU ARE A VESSEL FOR THE STRANGER!"

Hearing the damned entity's voice was like someone running a blade along the bone of her skull. Uva shuddered, but rallied as she continued her task. She reached out and pulled the largest pieces of Shiv back in place as all her remaining guardians broke away from her mana strands. They were all across time now, restraining the Recollector's Chronomantic attacks by attacking its very past.

To Uva's relief—and astonishment—the fragments of Shiv's mind started melting together and regenerating. It was unnatural; it was bullshit; it also wasn't nearly fast enough for him to reach full coherence in time before the Recollector was on them. She watched the Recollector through Shiv's eyes as it vanished and reappeared, skipping kilometers of distance at a time. She caught it ripping one of the New-Dreamt apart, pulling the lesser eldritch entities' revolving rings from their bodies.

"I—hurts... Everything hurts..." Shiv groaned internally.

She winced as she felt his pain, his confusion. But there was something else there: Rage. A massive, enormous silo of rage that had been building in the depths of his being, magnified by all the torture he just endured. "I know. I'm sorry. I came—I should have come sooner. But I need you to listen and act. Alright? The one that hurt you is coming back for us. And I need you to stand and fight. Stand and—"

"Fight!" Shiv's mind reacted instinctively—almost joyously. "Can't remember... thing... Asshole! Hurt me! Fucker!" And without any prompting from Uva, Shiv exploded off the ground as his own Berserk triggered. His casual and sudden decision to charge the Recollector after all the trauma he sustained baffled her and caught her entirely off-guard.

It caught the entity off guard too as he slammed into it hard enough to create another explosion of force and flame. The world shook. Even tethered to Shiv's mind, Uva could barely keep up with what was happening. She was still Adept-Tier in Reflexes, boasting only a Flow of the Viperess Skill Evolution. A Master was usually a blur to her. With Berserk and Momentum Core, Shiv was moving beyond most Master-Tiers.

And then the Chronomancy came in, and she found herself unable to follow the resulting battle at all.

Best commit to fixing his mind first, she thought. Then, a discordant sound crashed against Shiv's consciousness, and the parts that were healing started to fracture again. Uva responded immediately,

binding and fixing what she could. “That, and stopping the Recollector from driving him deeper into madness.”

Berserk > 9

Adamantine Adaption > 138

Shiv didn’t know his own name. He couldn’t remember his own life. All he knew was that the ugly thing with a bunch of tentacles and eyes left him broken—but the dumb piece of shit forgot to finish the job for good.

Rage consumed Shiv. Absolute rage. All-gripping rage. But with rage came joy, for now there was an absence of pain and a comforting presence in his mind. He wasn’t alone. He knew that. Shiv just didn’t know who he was with—but he felt like he really liked them. And them being here just spiked his rage into new heights as he faintly remembered a woman screaming as she was dismembered.

The air around him ignited a millisecond before he struck the entity dead-on. Through it all, he sapped momentum instinctively, his speed spiking with every passing instant. Shiv struck the thing with a headbutt. The rest of Shiv’s body was still deformed and broken from the torture. He felt a misshapen sack of meat. He didn’t care. It didn’t matter. He would beat this thing to death using himself as a blunt instrument, and he was going to enjoy doing it.

He crashed into the entity while it was struggling with some kind of creature made of rings. It splattered apart as Shiv's face sheared clean through its body. Intense pain exploded through Shiv as he felt part of his jaw fracture from the sheer force of the impact. An explosion washed out over the world. A tide of force flung fire ahead of itself, deepening the crater at the very base of the gate.

Something cried out inside him to stay hidden—to use his Silhouette. Shiv reactively went transparent.

But the entity didn't stay dead. Instead, an echo of it crossed over from a golden river. From... a retroactive river of time. It came and swung a blade at Shiv. It cut fast. Faster than even Shiv while Berserk was active.

And missed. The blade went over his head. Shiv headbutted the entity again in its ugly palm-face. Several fingers snapped. The entity reeled back. Shiv felt a thundering pressure hit peak capacity inside him as he blasted through the creature, going so fast that he carried with him a tide of devastating force.

Silhouette > 95

Momentum Core > 96

For the second time, the entity disintegrated. But Shiv kept going. He tore the entirety of Gate Theborn, and flames clung to his body as a hurricane followed in his wake. The ground beneath cracked asunder, parting as a spreading fracture, unzipped by his speed. As Shiv's Momentum Core finally went empty, pulled with his gravitic field and launched him back toward the fight as he started slamming his fists together.

“HOW?” the entity screamed. From afar, Shiv could see the entity trying to move, but its echoes were pinned in place by a series of ring-shaped creatures—like the one the entity ripped apart earlier. Dozens of the entity’s temporal clones were clenched tight within the ring-shaped creatures, and more importantly, its retroactive rivers were also anchored in position as well. It began shifting its trapped echoes over to its main body as it killed the ring-monsters over and over, trying to free its own past. “BROKE YOU! OVER AND OVER! BROKE YOUR MIND! BROKE YOUR BODY! ONLY SOUL ENDURED! HOW ARE YOU STILL FIGHTING! ANOMALY!”

The entity’s wails echoed across the entirety of Gate Theborn, and Shiv realized he could hear a bit of Confriga in its voice. Confriga? Why did he remember that name? Why did he hate that name? It didn’t matter. Nothing but hurting and killing the entity mattered. That was why he was here. That was what he was going to do.

Then, there came another voice inside him, begging him to heal and arm himself now that he had a moment to breathe. “Shiv—get yourself ready. We have a plan, but we need you to keep the entity contested and distracted.”

“Gonna kill it!” Shiv growled, bloodlust overtaking his thoughts. And that was the downside to Berserk: You didn’t get to keep your rationality while it was active, and Shiv was very, very pissed about all the pain the entity had put him through.

“Shiv! No! Listen to me!”

Part of him tried. Tried as hard as that little broken piece of his consciousness could. But the battle-madness gripped Shiv deep. Bloodlust and muscle memory guided his intuition. “Rip! Rip! Cut! Dice! I am the chef! You are the food! Eat you! Eat you for benefits! Punch you with my wounds! Punch!”

A feeling of absolute incredulity exploded inside him. And a second voice joined the first. Shiv was too busy shouting at the entity to properly hear the new speaker, though.

“Oh, Composer, how am I—yes! Yes, Adam, I’m trying! What do you mean, try harder?! He’s been driven mad! Stop coaching me on my task! Focus on yours—is the tower cleared? No? Then focus on your duty and leave me to mine!”

“Punch!” Shiv growled. Faintly, he recalled hitting people with his injuries. He could feel his injuries... Feel his body. He just needed to focus on moving his injuries into— A small wyrm splashed into existence with a flare of crimson mana from Shiv’s intent. It burrowed into him, consuming the many injuries deforming his body. Parts of Shiv snapped back into place. Most of his pain vanished between bites, but the left side of him still hurt constantly. The wyrm glowed around his person as the fattened length of its body gleamed with crystalline chunks. It was nearly a full meter longer than him now, but he could still feel it. And he was going to smash the entity with it.

He wanted to say something, but lost track of his own words and just started howling incoherently instead.

Chapter 88 (II) Companions [II]

Shiv smashed into the entity for a second time just as it drove a blade through another of those ring-things. It let out a mind-splitting shriek of annoyance as Shiv flung his massive wyrm into its back. A mana explosion consumed them both—and Shiv took the opportunity to seize his enemy’s sword arm in an elbow lock.

It tried to move its retroactive rivers, to use its Chronomancy mana against him directly. It couldn’t. Not with all twenty-four of its remaining rivers locked in place by the ring-monsters. It tried whipping at Shiv but missed more than it hit as he started headbutting it.

“STOP! INSOLENT! WRONG-NATURED! MONSTER! ABOMINATION! WILL BREAK YOUR SOUL THIS TIME! BREAK YOU FOR—”

And then the entity let out an agonized wail of torment that sounded like music to Shiv’s ears. He barely noticed the near-transparent Psychomancy threads buried inside the entity’s mind, injecting it with something. He started hitting the entity as hard as he could, and somewhere between his second and tenth headbutt, just as his Momentum Core was on the verge of fullness, another piece of his broken mind slipped back into place.

Time.

Shiv could wrestle with time as well.

A golden layer of armor manifested over Shiv as time slowed—then stopped altogether as he pulled on the entity’s right arm with all his strength. His gravitic field exploded. The entity’s arm was shredded and dismembered. Shiv batted it aside and drove his head into the entity’s hand-face again. His Momentum Core rumbled inside him. Shiv unleashed every bit of force he built up right into the body with a charging knee.

Moving through frozen time was a struggle. Shiv still impacted it with enough force to obliterate the entity. The beginnings of a massive shockwave pulsed out around the being, but didn’t move any further than that. It returned to life—but this time it shot over to one of its non-trapped echoes a kilometer away.

“DREAMTAKER!” the entity screamed, clutching its head. “AWAY! GET AWAY! MINE! NOT YOURS! FOR THE STRANGER! NOT YOUR COLORS! KEEP YOUR COLORS AWAY!”

A low, rumbling laugh sounded from inside Shiv's skull. "No. Go on, unbreaking one. Indulge yourself. Have fun."

Shiv allowed time to move at a trickle. His armor softened just as the first cracks formed. The fractures continued crawling across his temporal shell, but the damage occurred far more slowly than Shiv had expected. It was also far easier to surge across the world when he allowed time to progress at a slight pace. It was the distance between sprinting through mud rather than solid stone.

He closed on the entity in seconds. In that time, his armor grew ever more brittle, but Shiv didn't care. He didn't care that there were still many more echoes he had to kill before the entity stayed dead, or that it was shooting beams of accelerated time at him from its chest-eyes that he had to avoid. Shiv was moving. It was pinned and slow. Soon, he was going to get his hands on it. Soon, he was going to be bloody, angry, and joyous all at the same time.

Even in pain and madness, life was glorious.

Won't have this... any other way...

The entity sang. A spike of pain crashed into Shiv's mind, and something broke inside him. Shiv's violent psychosis spiraled into delusion as he believed himself to be invincible.

Shiv slammed into the entity with a final spike of his gravitic field. Parts of his golden armor shattered free from his body, but he would hold time at a trickle for as long as he could. It tried to center its beams on him, but Shiv spiked upward and then back down, mangling the large hand it had in place of a head. If Shiv was running through mud, the entity was submerged in it. Shiv blasted from point to point, slamming into the entity from above and behind. Its body folded and ruptured. It let out a howling song

that tore at Shiv's sanity, but he locked it in place from behind and began to drive brutal knees into its sides, filling his core again.

Strider of the Unbending Path > 113

Striking Proficiency > 41

Just as he felt his temporal shell shatter, he triggered his Momentum Core again while grappling the entity—driving it straight down through the air in a plunging suplex. He drove its hand-head into the ground as the air combusted around them again. The roar of the explosion was deafening.

The entity cut at Shiv and missed. It slashed at him wildly with its tentacles and missed. Shiv drilled the entity into the ground and left a tunnel two kilometers deep into the bedrock of Gate Theborn. He didn't miss.

As his Momentum Core finally emptied, Shiv started beating the thing again, elbowing and stomping its badly brutalized body, hammering it deeper and deeper into the earth—

And then it caught his right elbow and squeezed hard. Shiv's Adamantine Adaption was beyond hardened to physical trauma by this point. It failed to break anything with sheer force, but it still pushed him back, even as he continued battering it with his free limbs. Then, its curled tentacles slashed back. They cracked against his back but didn't do any harm. Then, they started wrapping around his body, and where Shiv's durability prevailed, his strength proved insufficient against the entity.

That didn't stop him from biting one of the tentacles before it could claim his left arm. A good thing too, because the entity awkwardly thrust out with Absence, seeking to pierce his chest just then. The blade moved. It sank a finger's length into Shiv and got stuck. He howled and grabbed it with his Magebreaker.

Shiv's gauntlet rattled and cracked. The sword responded the same way.

The brief magical struggle ended as the entity hit Shiv's jaw with its free hand.

Shiv's head snapped back. The world spun and shook, but Shiv managed to stay conscious. He did, however, get punched out of the tunnel he made through the collapsed underside of Gate Theborn, sailing through the air until his back finally crashed against the top of a building. Shiv pulled hard with his gravitic field before he traveled any further. The bottom section of the descending tower he slammed into burst apart, but the rest of the building was preserved. As were any of the living inside.

Then the entity came blasting toward him out from the deep pit they left in the ground, its many tendrils lashing wide. In the brief time Shiv was stunned, the entity managed to slay most of the ringed monsters holding its rivers in place. Shiv could see twenty freely moving rivers now; rivers of retroactive time that could be used against him again. Rivers it commanded to spiral around its body, ensuring that he would have to clash with its Chronomancy should his Strider ever get the chance to regenerate.

Didn't matter. Shiv snarled like a wild animal as he shot toward his adversary. He accelerated, slamming his fists together, building up momentum. It shot toward him, its eyes glaring with abject loathing and frustration. It sang that mind-tearing song again, but unlike when time was frozen, Shiv felt something harden over his consciousness just as something inside him began to tear.

Two voices called out to Shiv. He didn't listen. His Berserk was still running hot—and it ran hot until another section of his ego fused back in place. Anger. Anger was a resource he could use. He could

spend all his anger right now to empower his Berserk! Make his rage absolutely unstoppable for an explosive instant.

More damage! More hurt! Shiv screamed internally.

Shiv triggered his Master of Rage Feat. He fed Berserk his anger. His physical capabilities exploded beyond measure. For a single instant, he went beyond Master-Tier in terms of Physicality, Reflexes, and Toughness.

The entity tried striking him with its retroactive rivers. It tried lashing him with its tentacles. Most missed because his Silhouette. The rest weren't fast enough. Shiv manifested his mostly shattered time-armor just before he collided with the entity. He threw a colossal left uppercut. It got its sword in place to block.

Three things broke at once.

His Magebreaker struck Absence and split apart on Shiv's hand. The sword screamed—and then snapped in half as he punched through it—punched through the entity itself. Then, Shiv's temporal shell burst apart again. The entity died. And returned to life ten meters away. Shiv's anger ran empty. His Berserk state ended. He managed a single confused blink before it smashed into him.

They exploded through the plaza, and as they climbed higher, Shiv saw an entire district of Gate Theborn crumble and plunge down to the utterly ruined bedrock below. He dropped an elbow on the entity's face, but it caught his limbs with its tentacles and pulled him close before slamming a palm into his chest.

A shockwave rattled Shiv. Three of his ribs fractured. He spat at the entity and blasted down using his field, pulling it along. Yet, it clutched him tight and held him in place even as he spiked his field in random directions, trying to get free. It drew itself closer to him, looming over him as he cried out with effort. Once more, it clutched his face and sang—sang its mind-breaking song as loud as it could.

But Shiv's thoughts were still hardened somehow, and he only felt mildly disoriented instead. "Godsdamn," he cursed. "Is there... a Shit-Singing skill?"

It hit him. Over and over. The world shook. Things inside Shiv broke. Every time it struck the left side of his body, he howled with misery. Then, after an eternity of descending blows, the entity broke one of its fingers punching him and let out a melodic croon of pain. It flinched back, clutching its hand. Shiv laughed but gurgled and vomited blood all over the entity. It took practically everything he had to keep his head up after. Glaring was still easy, though. "Funny... I can't... I can't remember much... But you... Did you always hit this soft?"

"Enough! DONE WITH YOU! DONE! GOING TO HOLLOW YOU PROPERLY THIS TIME! NO MORE STRUGGLE! AND NO MORE SEEKER INSIDE!"

It reached a hand around Shiv's head. And then a feeling hit him—instinct took hold again and he dodged.

He dodged inside himself somehow.

The world went gray. A shroud of white and red consumed Shiv. Someone fell out of him with a cry. Then there was a woman sobbing beside him, her expression manic, her mind badly wounded. To top it all off, Shiv felt colder with every passing instant, and a brightness lit up within the entity—and inside the woman that just dropped out from inside him.

A woman that the entity caught by the neck with an outstretched hand.

Primal panic consumed Shiv. He shot down and slammed into the entity, only for it to turn—the golden eyes lining its chest burning bright. He struck it—and then found himself cast back in time while it continued moving through the present with the woman still in its hands. It drove another blow into Shiv's leftmost rib and caught him before he could sail off from the force with its tentacles.

Then, time resumed. The woman beside him gasped. Anger swelled inside Shiv, and he fed it into his Gravitic Wrestler, smashing himself into the entity and knocking Absence out of its hand—but then it sang. It sang, and he screamed as his mind started to unravel. The gate's mana core shone right beside them, and the pain made Shiv's perception tear until even light stopped making sense to him.

"Ah. Soft. Pliable. Thought-tissues vulnerable without Seeker to—"

And then the singing stopped as the woman let out a piercing cry and unleashed a blast of colors into the entity from her eyes.

Parallel Thinking > 64

Flow of the Viperess > 72

Puppeteer of the Formless Strings > 111

Dreamtaker's Gaze > 9

Uva gave up trying to figure out what was happening while Shiv fought and just reacted. She couldn't keep up with a Berserking Master-Tier bruiser with Momentum Core constantly filled; she couldn't keep up with the even faster Recollector; and there was no hope of her figuring out what was happening when either of them wielded their Chronomancy against each other.

Entire sections of time were missing from her awareness. At several points, she was trying to put Shiv back together, only to discover that the part she just shoved back in place was damaged again, and that he was smashing the Recollector deeper and deeper into the earth. Then, they were back up in the sky, and suddenly, she was falling out of Shiv after briefly weaving her mana strands through his mind, helping him maintain his mental structure against the entity's unraveling song.

Now, after another patch of missing time, she found herself clutched in the Recollector's hand while Shiv growled, held tight by all ten of the eldritch being's tentacles. It started to sing just then, and Shiv's growl turned to screams. But its attention was away from her, and the Dreamtaker took the opportunity to whisper to her.

“Show it your gaze. It cannot escape the colors. And it cannot escape my touch.”

And so Uva did. She let out a cry as she pierced the veil with her sight, opening a wound to the Outside. A blast of brilliant colors surged out from her eyes and crashed into the entity like a rushing current during a flood. It flinched. And then it screamed as a swarm of enormous, feathered tongues punched through its body. The Recollector ignited with prismatic flame as the tongues incinerated themselves. While it was stunned, Uva cast every last mana strand she had into its mind.

She expected to bounce off a hardened layer of Magical Resistance, but instead sank deep into its alien, byzantine consciousness with ease. Before she could cast herself into its mind, she felt its hand close tight around her skull. Uva gasped as she was squeezed—and then kept getting squeezed as her head was compressed across several new dimensional vectors that most people simply couldn’t access. Her face curved inward. Her hair and forehead elongated into a long, flapping strip as more of her head was displaced. She accidentally whipped the tip of her forehead into Shiv’s eye and heard him grunt in surprise. The entity closed its fist entirely—but it was still only affecting three dimensions of space.

That were the limitations of using Confriga’s body as a vessel. It needed to apply pressure across at least two more dimensions before it could actually crush Uva.

But by then it was too late. She cast herself into its mind and tore at whatever she could reach. She gasped as the sheer strangeness of its non-linear thoughts as they crashed into her. It screamed, because even non-linear thoughts and memories could be torn to pieces. Then, within its mind, she opened her gaze again, and the Dreamtaker laughed as more of its New-Dreamt ripped into the Recollector from the inside.

Uva would have gone longer—but then a patch of time went missing from her mind as she toppled out from the entity into open air. She fell from the sky for a full second as she noticed a corrosive rift open in the space above her.

Adam! She realized. Adam had just hit the entity somehow. But where was—

And then two impossibly strong arms wrapped around her, and her fall stopped. She looked up at Shiv, and he looked like a bloody, confused mess. But still, he was better than he was... however long ago.

Chronomancy is bullshit, Uva complained internally.

“We know each other, don’t we?” Shiv muttered, sounding lost.

Right. His mind was still mostly ruined. He probably would have stayed broken for far longer if she hadn’t moved the pieces back together.

“Yes,” she breathed, summoning her shield to give her something to stand on in the air. “Quite well. But we need to—”

A shape blinked into existence just beside her. And then it vanished as a corrosive arrow smashed into it. The Recollector shrieked and vanished as a Necromantically charged Veilpiercer punched through its chest just as its blade hissed an inch away from Shiv's neck. It appeared again—but then so did an arrow. And this continued all across Gate Theborn.

Everywhere the Recollector manifested across time, it found one of Adam’s arrows waiting for it.

“What’s happening?” Shiv asked.

“I’m... not entirely sure,” Uva replied. But then, she caught sight of a shape high in the air. His wings burned with fiery glory. His arms were ten, and each blow he fired was tinged with the decay of Necromancy and tore across paths unseen.

The entity screamed. A few times, it blinked out to strike at Adam. Never once did it manage to get close.

It was faster than the Young Lord by far, but it seemed as if his arrows always arrived ahead of time.

She reached out to him with a mana strand, and he responded with a gasp of absolute terror. It didn’t show in his posture due to his sheer focus. He was always firing, but inside, he was being torn apart by the very sight of the entity. “Uva! Uva! Where’s your help?! My mind—breaking! I can feel—”

Shit! She stitched the tears inside him back together and bound each of them to each other as a telepathic network was re-established for their team. Shiv shivered. “Who... Who’s that...”

“Whose that?” Adam cried. Two more of its arrows passed through the air beside Uva and Shiv, striking the entity at two different intervals of time. She could feel how much strain his mind was under trying to guess the Recollector’s next location... But he was doing it. He was divining the exact position of his enemy every time. “Did he just say who’s that? Bloody hells, how bad is his mind?”

And just then, a loud shriek sounded as the entity reappeared over the remaining districts of Gate Theborn. Shiv's breath caught as he saw something she couldn't. A flicker of faint gold shimmered around him. Chronomancy. She was starting to hate Chronomancy.

"TIRED! TIRED OF THIS! TIRED OF YOU! KILLED ENOUGH OF MY PAST! KILLED ENOUGH OF WHAT IS!" Several of Adam's corrosive arrows smashed into it, but it didn't dodge this time. The foul, green energies of Necromancy exploded over the entity's body, but it didn't scream. Instead, she heard Confriga wailing in its stead. "Damage this vessel. Break it! DON'T CARE ANYMORE! LESSER PRIZE! LOWER PRIZE! YOU!" It pointed at Shiv. "UNBREAKING VESSEL! AND SEEKER BESIDES! WILL GIFT YOU TO STRANGER! WILL GIFT YOU AND KILL THE ARCHER!"

"EAT SHIT AND DIE!" the Young Lord shouted from afar, the heat in his voice masking just how terrified he was.

Dozens of Necromancy-tipped Veilpiercers blasted into the entity's body. Cracks formed over it as the body spasmed.

"NO!" Confriga cried out. "YOU PROMISED! I WAS TO GET ETERNAL—"

An arrow crashed into the entity's head, and Confriga burst apart into an outline of festering decay as he plunged down. But from his soul-withered husk hatched a new shape. A colossal shape of countless limbs, uncountable eyes, and a titanic ten-fingered head that stared at Uva with baleful hate.

"U-Uva," Shiv muttered. Another piece of his mind snapped back in place. "Your name is... And—" His expression hardened, but she could see the unease in his eyes. "Cast yourself into Adam's mind. Do it. Now!"

She wanted to hesitate. She didn't. She cast herself across and—

And both she and Adam lost another patch of time as the true form of the Recollector and Shiv slammed into one another.

Chapter 89 (I) Companions [III]

“That’s one big, ugly asshole. And a bigger, uglier hammer.”

“He’s not that big.”

“You always say that shit. And I always have to pull your dumb ass out of the fire.”

“Harlon, which one of us saves the other more?”

“Me. Because every time you need to save me, it’s because I put myself in danger to pull your ass out of the fire.”

“So. We are at best even.”

“No. You’re a dumb shit, and I’m a fucking moron because however stupid you are to get us into these situations, I’m stupid enough to keep following you and getting myself hurt.”

“Well, that sounds like Vera’s right, then. Some more Toughness will do you good.”

“Hey. Fuck you. You don’t see me using your wife’s words against you. She always says think ahead, think ahead. We wouldn’t be fighting these guys if you thought ahead.”

“And I wouldn’t be about to cripple this boy if he didn’t try to grab Rose.”

“...Yeah. But it’s more fun to blame you.”

“Harlon.”

“Yeah?”

“Has anyone told you you’re kind of a bastard?”

“You. All the time. So. You drop the big one and I’ll hurt the little guys?”

“Yeah. The usual way. And Harlon.”

“Hm.”

“Thanks for being here.”

“Just start the fight, dipshit.”

-Harlon Lowe and Roland Arrow

“...Cast yourself into Adam’s mind. Do it. Now!”

More of Shiv’s mind snapped back together, but that was of secondary importance by far. What consumed all of his focus right then was the entity. Its retroactive rivers were retracting back into its original form. As the true shape of the eldritch being ripped free from Confriga’s decayed husk, the entity consumed all of its retroactive rivers.

The golden mana of its Chronomancy condensed around its immense form. Shiv blasted toward the entity with a spike of his gravitic field. His temporal shell was only half regenerated, but he was the only one that could stall this thing and contend with its time magic. But to Shiv’s disbelief, the entity still wasn’t done transforming. He drained momentum by slamming his field against his body. His speed spiked. He manifested his Strider of the Unbending Path over himself and reduced time to a trickle as he got within five hundred meters.

The creature's physical manifestation twitched to a sudden halt just as it prepared to respond. But its material form was the least of his concerns. The Chronomancy mana around the creature began to sour without Confriga. The gold turned tarnished. Spots formed within the mana, spots painted with hues Shiv couldn't comprehend. The entity's "mana field" burst apart just as Shiv hammered a knee into one of its hundred-meter-long head fingers and tried to bend it off to the side.

The temporal detonation washed over Shiv but failed to fling him back in time. However, as the temporal explosion swept over him, he saw it paint an outline behind him as it traveled outward. It painted ethereal chronological echoes of him across the span of ten seconds. They trembled across various places in existence, and Shiv felt his temporal shell resonate with them.

Just then, the world around Shiv grew unbearably bright with burning time mana. And he saw the immolated visage of the entity multiply. Instead of Shiv facing a kilometer-sized eldritch titan with a great many temporal echoes bound to it by retroactive rivers, he was now dealing with twenty-six kilometer-sized eldritch titans. One lingered in the present, while the twenty-five existed in some kind of twisted past-present mix that allowed them to affect the current time while being seconds behind.

None of them were echoes. All of them were glaring at him with those golden, time accelerating eyes, and Shiv's stomach plunged as his damaged brain realized just how felling fucked he was.

The only source of consolation was how all the entities seemed to be dissolving. Like the natural passage of time was grinding them all to dust.

But they weren't dissolving nearly fast enough to spare Shiv as they all prepared to unleash a flood of time-accelerating beams from the hundreds of eyes lining their enormous hand-heads.

Then, in a haze of mind-broken stupor, a series of realizations came to Shiv.

Most of what the entity did with time while it possessed Confriga should be achievable by another Chronomancer. Well, aside from the damn echoes. That was utterly unnatural. What it did within his body was all achievable through Chronomancy. What Shiv currently beheld was unnatural. Things had pasts and presents. What they didn't have were pasts that coexisted with their presents—as if the two were on the same spectrum of time.

And that meant that Shiv could theoretically do what it did earlier. At least somewhat.

His temporal armor also wasn't actually solidified. The mana was just moving so fast that it appeared solid. So long as his temporal armor remained intact, Shiv was the only one who could manipulate his personal chronological progression. And that allowed him to separate and manipulate his personal progress through time from how the world naturally progressed—or the mana of a rival Chronomancer.

And he wasn't actually stopping all the time in the world by driving his Chronomancy mana against the rushing current of the fleeting present. In effect, he was immersed in a magical shroud of fluid chronology. The thing he really did with it so far was accelerate his own pace of time so fast that the rest of the world became still. Effectively, one of his seconds might as well have been a year outside at the speed his mana was surging around him. It also induced a feeling of temporal friction as it ground against the slower pace of natural time, thus straining his movements.

Accelerating his personal pace of time was a powerful ability, but it should be far from the only thing he could do with Chronomancy.

His kukri had allowed him to anchor himself to a target across time. The entity could slip back in time across its retroactive rivers. Or use it to displace Shiv back across his own chronological history. And if it could do it to him, why couldn't he do the same?

Thousands of temporal beams speared out toward Shiv from every entity at once

Shiv slammed his fists together one final time and filled his Momentum Core just so he could have another second to focus—to act.

Shit! Uh, okay. Moving my Chronomancy mana really fast around me is easy, but how the hells do I move myself back in time? And then Shiv sensed the resonance between him and his temporal echoes. Unlike with the entity, his echoes were just imprints on time. They couldn't act or react, they didn't exist in a retroactive river, but they were there. They stretched out over a vast distance of space, and he could feel each of them—there was a feeling of magnetism that pulled at him. Called to him.

For the first time, Shiv did something different from hyper-accelerating the dense field of Chronomancy coating his body. He let instinct guide him, mainly because a good portion of his mind was still badly damaged. He had no room for complex thought.

But instinct was enough.

Instead of moving his mana, he tried casting it out of him, the same way he might launch a spell via his Woundeater. However, his Chronomancy was rooted to his body—molded to him. Where it moved, he would move and vice versa. He tried directing his magic, but as he focused, his faint temporal echoes came aglow with golden radiance. Ten seconds of time. Ten places in space. Shiv felt a magnetism connected to each instance of himself, each of them as if mana anchors he could attach himself to. His Momentum Core discharged. Shiv reached out as far as he could and cast himself back across his own history.

His temporal shell cracked apart. But Shiv was reeled back across time, zipping through each of his temporal imprints until he snapped in place to where he was ten full seconds ago. The sensation felt just like using his kukri's Chrono-Anchored Strike—and that was probably part of the reason his Chronomancy Skill Evolution turned out the way it did.

As he arrived, the last pieces of his shell broke away, leaving him vulnerable. But every beam unleashed by the two dozen entities struck nothing at all.

Thousands of time-accelerating beams tore through the place where Shiv used to be. A half-second later, he promptly discharged past them, leaving the eldritch time-creature as surprised as he was.

Dammit, Shiv thought as he crashed through a bridge and accelerated toward the obliterated bedrock of Gate Theborn. I wish I figured that shit out sooner. Godsdamned you, System. Just felling throwing me a skill without letting me practice...

The entities howled in outrage. "FIXED TIMELINE IN MAGIC! STRIDER! WHY DRACONIC SKILL EVOLUTION! HOW DO YOU HAVE THIS?"

But while the entity stuck in the present raged, all the other ones broke away to crush Shiv beneath their immense bodies. Even with his temporal shell broken, he could still perceive the other entities due to his attunement to Chronomancy. The way the entities could all attack his present despite being things from the past was bullshit. The fact that they were all a kilometer in size was also bullshit.

He barely reacted in time. He pulled himself to the side using his gravitic field and gained a stay of execution. Then, another two entities descended, and their shadows swallowed him.

They missed. They misjudged his exact position due to his outline. Once more, Silhouette saves my—

Shiv's thought broke as one of the entities finally slammed down on him. The world went white with pain. Shiv's body let out a series of sickening cracks. Adamantine Adaption kept him alive, but the blow was still harder than anything he ever took. When the entity drove its hand-shaped head into him, the air didn't combust, and no inferno spread. Instead, the air ionized as plasma consumed Shiv. Everything went bright, and he ended up getting ground into the bottom of the gate. A tidal wave of heavy stone broke and melted around Shiv as a firestorm seared his skin.

He let out an agonized rasp as he puked out blood for what felt like the thousandth time. And before he could try shifting out of context or even struggling against the temporally displaced entity pressing down on him, another entity phased through it and slammed down on Shiv again.

Shiv choked. Both of his lungs burst. More entities crashed down on him. His bones shattered. His muscles tore. He saw Adam's arrows tear through corrosive rifts and pass through the entities without ever hitting them. The Young Lord knew where they were, but he couldn't affect when they were. The only one he could affect was—

The entity rooted into the present moment smashed against Shiv thereafter, and everything went dark. It felt like a second. It felt like an eternity. Then, with a final heavy blow, Shiv jolted back to a formless consciousness and realized he was dead.

Momentum Core 95 > 98

Adamantine Adaption 139 > 144

Strider of the Unbending Path 113 > 119

Gravitic Wrestler 129 > 133

Silhouette > 101 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Silhouette (Adept) > The Creeping Void (Master)

The Creeping Void 101 (Master)

The Silhouette hiding Shiv's Revenant form filled with absolute pitch black darkness, rendering him extremely noticeable. The eyes of the entities snapped to him immediately, and Shiv cursed silently as he thought that he resembled a splotch of black ink on the world.

But then the darkness continued to spread. It spilled out from him. It painted the space around him and kept growing. The crawling darkness exploded out from Shiv and thickened into an opaque miasma that just kept building as long as he willed it. And to Shiv's pleasure, he could perfectly see through the darkness despite its unnatural thickness. The entity, however—

“WHAT IS THIS? CAN'T... CAN'T SEE ANYMORE? WHERE? WHY? NO LACK OF LIGHT ELUDES MY EYES— NO! NOT DARKNESS. VOID. NOTHINGNESS. HIDDEN IN ABSENCE! ANOTHER MONSTER SKILL-SOUL-SHAPE-POWER! WRONGNESS!”

Shiv reached out and drained the entity. It channeled beams out from its eyes. Beams of discordant color, beams of searing energy, beams of time, and more. But it couldn't see Shiv, and with each passing second, it was lost in the darkness. His darkness. The blackness that kept leaking out from the evolution of his Silhouette.

In seconds, the bottommost portion of Gate Theborn was clouded by a shroud of impenetrable blackness.

Once again, this was more concealment than outright stealth. When he used this skill, his enemy would generally know where he was. But generally wasn't good enough for the entity to track where Shiv was, to notice that he just hatched out from a resurrector cocoon at the base of its present-time body, and was in the middle of launching himself up and away.

Blastwaves of force shook Shiv as the entity began to slam instance after instance of itself down upon the world. It was like watching a blind man try to crush a cockroach. It could vaguely hear him. It could feel the air he displaced while flying. But most of its eye beams still slashed wide and unfocused.

But once more, quantity proved a quality in and of itself. All twenty-six entities unleashed a devastating display of unknowable colors from all of their eyes. Even wrapped in an impenetrable darkness, there was no way for Shiv to dodge the attack.

Conventionally.

He shifted out of context. The beams tore the space he occupied. Reality twitched and disfigured for a moment as another place beyond Gate Theborn slipped through countless rifts. A place that clawed at Shiv's very sanity to witness. But then it receded as the entities quelled their gazes.

“What... What happened... Why darkness... What is... Sense disturbance in future-time-not-past-present. But why here? Missing pieces from... Don’t—not something in past. Would know if something tried to change my pas—”

And then a series of corrosive arrows tore out into Shiv’s darkness. Twenty-six arrows descended. Twenty-five struck nothing. One inflicted the first actual instance of damage the entity ever suffered.

Chapter 89 (II) Companions [III]

It struck as a splash of Necromancy bit deep into its eye and withered the glowing oculus. Black substance erupted out from the entity in a hissing spray as it stumbled. Its body, mostly a mass of colossal moving fingers, twitched across the ground as it shrieked in abject misery. The song of its shrieks tore at Shiv’s mind, and he emerged from his Vitae clutching his skull.

But he was still trailing a flood of void-black miasma wherever he went. Though the darkness that spread across the base of Gate Theborn started to thin and fade, the space above was consumed by a veil of unknowable black.

“HURTS? HURTS! HURTSSS!” the entity raged. The other versions of it sported similar wounds on their eyes as well. And that’s when Shiv realized they all still shared a soul. More Necromancy arrows tore across dimensions. The entity barely avoided getting hit again by shifting one of its pasts selves over to take the hit. Shiv corrected his assumption. The past self that was hit burst apart into dissolving Chronomancy. The present entity flickered back into place thereafter.

And then there were twenty-five. Twenty-five time-displaced eldritch entities left.

Huh, Shiv thought. He began crashing his fists together as he built up momentum. He shot past districts of Gate Theborn and bit back a groan of displeasure. Most of the gate was utterly destroyed. Much had been torn down during Shiv's battle against the entity. Only a scant few bridges and a few dangling platforms remained, but the buildings they carried were mostly rubble anyway. But in the distance, near the surface gate, he saw massive crowds of people huddled around the few remaining buildings in this place—thousands of people all packed together.

That looks like a sizable chunk of survivors. At least some people got away. Godsdammit. Every time I fight here, someone dies. And now, he was starting to suspect that it was the System's will to reap mass death and carnage. Is this enough felling strife for you?

Shiv speared high into the air. Below, the entities struck blindly, channeling their gazes through the Creeping Void he left in his wake. Soon, the middle of Gate Theborn, where the districts and people once lived, was drenched in a shroud of nothingness. But Shiv never stopped expelling more darkness. Without it, he would have likely been dead again. With it, his temporal shell fully regenerated, and Shiv had a moment to start preparing.

He reached into his cloak and started assembling a new set of armor around himself. He also recreated something from his broken memories. "Cancer flail," Shiv grunted to himself. "I need... I need a cancer flail."

As he did this, he tried to find Adam—but the Young Lord was nowhere to be seen—Shiv spotted a few dozen mana strands undulating blindly within his shadows. "U-Uva," he muttered. "Right... She's... a Psychomancer. I think." He pulled himself toward the mana strands just as one of the entities blasted up into the air, barely missing him.

"WHERE? SHOW SELF! SHOW! SELF!" It sounded more frustrated than ever before.

Shiv just let it pass. He hated the damn thing. He hated eldritch bullshit. He hated all of this. But he needed a plan of attack. It was too big, too fast, too strong, and its Chronomancy was stronger than his as well. Pair that with how its nightmarish voice slashed at his very mind, and Shiv was done throwing himself at this thing in futility. He required a plan—an idea on how to kill it for good. But his mind was still all kinds of injured.

Thankfully, he wasn't the only one here in this fight.

He had companions.

Bowslinger 98 > 99

Tactical Overseer 81 > 82

Mark of the Seeking Clairvoyant 103 > 105

Necromancy 2 > 3

Adam kept firing. He kept firing at every violet imprint on the world. He kept firing at all the things his Mark of the Seeking Clairvoyant highlighted when he first infused his Divination mana into the Recollector. Just receiving the details about its existence slashed at his mind. He kept getting flashes

from its perspective—a perspective split across twenty-five instances of its personal chronology as it just kept...

Kept...

It kept bloody blinking out from his awareness. It was in one place and then another. There was no rhyme or reason to where it was going or where it was going to appear next. And there were still twenty-five of the felling things. He couldn't tell which one was the original, or if there even was an original, or if they were about to skip across time or whatever other nonsense it kept pulling. And the more he focused on it, the more he tried to pull apart the details his Divination was feeding him, the more his mind broke, and the more Uva had to put him back together.

By this point, Adam was shooting Necromancy-infused lightning arrows at every single entity—wherever they appeared. His perfect awareness of the entities' perspectives and locations allowed him to guess where it was about to arrive in a strange way. It wasn't like precognition—though a lot of Diviners sold themselves as prophets. No, it was like being able to read casual patterns. Except that Adam was only semi-literate due to never truly practicing the art and only experiencing theory at the academy.

So. He solved that with quantity. More arrows. Arrows always. So many arrows that he was straining his Dimensionality mana for the first time.

The surrounding space around Adam shuddered brightly with a violet imprint. An entity was actively searching for him, rising high through the air while still being lost in that... unnerving, impenetrable darkness that kept growing across Gate Theborn.

"Shitshitshit!" the Young Lord cried. He fired an arrow in a random direction and then flew across the rift desperately. The shuddering and sudden perspective shift superimposing itself over his mind was usually the skill's way of hinting to Adam that he needed to run. He emerged ten kilometers away, and

he saw the space which he occupied come ablaze. A massive shockwave spread across that section of the gate. A swell of plasma dissipated thereafter, but Adam could feel the heat even so far away.

As the ionized air dissipated, he saw a violet imprint of an entity that continued screaming its hate for Shiv, for Adam, and its need to keep Uva as a vessel. The Young Lord sighed. "Have you found him yet?"

Uva's threads were spread across the district. She lost track of Shiv the moment he and the entities began their confusing time-brawl. After that, both he and Uva only caught a flicker of Shiv as he accelerated past the entity, missing it entirely for some reason before plunging into the demolished base of Gate Theborn. Adam considered tracking Shiv, but that required him to shift his Divination mana out of the Recollector, and he wasn't going to do that. Not a chance in all the hells.

"Uva?" Adam said. More perspectives splashed over his. The entities were groping blindly through the darkness. Where did that bloody darkness even come from? He couldn't see through it with his Seer of Horizons, and the sounds within were distorted as well. But he could still hear. But that was ruined by the entities singing their damned mind-rending songs, and so—

The space around them shuddered. Adam fired another arrow above the mana core. Time to reposition again. He hissed as an overflow of information tore something in his mind. The entities' perspectives briefly overlapped with his—the entities were all frustrated. They wanted to break and destroy everything. But they couldn't. They had lost a few of their past selves. And now the entity needed to drain some time from the survivors of the gate because it was dissolving before the rules of this dimension.

"Past or present is like space to it," the Dreamtaker whispered to Adam. "You can take a step back or forward. And so time here hates it. It burns within our existence. Without a vessel for it to endure, it is constantly being flayed by the passage of the present against its wishes."

Adam groaned as he clutched his head. His Divination was trying to show him even more, but it was too much. Even with Uva's help keeping his sanity tethered together, it was too much. Too much for him to process. Too much for him to understand. Too much—

"I think I found him,"

Uva declared. One of her mana strands shuddered as if a fishing line had just hooked something. "Or maybe he found me."

A moment later, Shiv's mind rejoined theirs. But ominously, the swelling darkness drew closer as well. Then, Uva drew some of Shiv's near-term memories, and Adam realized the source of the darkness had been the Deathless all along.

"Master-Tier Stealth," Adam commented to himself. He couldn't help but laugh. Of course, the bastard got another evolution from this. "Godsdamned, but I'm relieved it was just your Skill Evolution for once, Shiv. I thought the damned Recollector was doing something to bring it about."

Shiv's thoughts came slowly and painfully. "I... I think... I don't... Do you have a plan? It's hard to think about certain things. Hard to focus for long. But we need to kill this thing. We must kill this thing."

A heavy surge of anger came at the end of Shiv's thoughts, and Adam flinched as he tried not to remember Shiv's screams earlier.

"Right. A plan. Well. I managed to corrode the tower I had you drop earlier on the third gateway. I managed to plant the Graven Cage inside the severed elevator shaft. If we can get the Recollector across—"

“It’s too felling big,” Shiv grunted. He burst out from the top of the Creeping Void and flung himself at Adam. He was armored again, with a bone adamantite kukri in one hand and a cord—oh, good, of all the things this brain-damned bastard remembered, it was the cancer flail.

Shiv pulled back with his field as he came to a sudden halt beside Adam. “Too big,” Shiv gasped. “And there are too many. It’ll just move across time. It can...” He let out a groan as he lost his words. “It... The past is... It can go there. It exists there too. I can’t keep it pinned easily. And then... your Necromancy was the only thing that hurt it. It took out one of its eyes.”

Just then, the space around them shuddered violet again, and Adam bit back a hissed breath as his mind struggled to process what he was seeing. “People...” The entities were going up. They were screaming about— “They’re coming for the people. The survivors. They’re running out of their own time. They need to bind themselves to new vessels.”

“Desperate.” The Dreamtaker laughed. “Most do not have the soul-size-power-shape-integrity to bear the Recollector. They will break. It will only get a few more past selves from them.”

“A few more!” Adam cried. “We can’t deal with it now. What the hells are we supposed to do against more?” He fired a Veilpiercer that placed them directly over the surface gateway. Adam growled. His Dimensionality was starting to strain. He didn’t have many Veilpiercers left in him.

“It needs the Seeker. Or the unbreaking one. Won’t stop until it gets them. Otherwise, it dissolves for good. Gone-dust-time-flayed.” The Dreamtaker chuckled.

Adam just grimaced. He felt through the dimensional pathway, and Shiv followed.

“Adam,” Shiv said. “I... I can face it. I can confuse it with my darkness. Make it get lost. I can fight it across time with my Chronomancy. But I can’t protect the people from it. I can only die stalling it. Until it burns away. Or it breaks all of us.”

The Young Lord’s heartbeat quickened. How were they going to beat this damned thing? Even if he had infinite Dimensionality mana, or a method to... to...

And then he looked at Shiv. And he remembered how Shiv managed to ward off the Educator—and the forgotten Ascendant she was tied to.

“No!” Uva snarled. “No. Do you hear me? No. That is not acceptable. We will NOT do that.”

“Do what?” Shiv muttered. He stared at Adam’s arrow for a moment, and slowly, through the broken ruins of his memories, he grunted. “Oh... That. But the blast might kill everyone here. I’ll do it, but—”

“No,” Adam said, speaking to both Uva and Shiv. “I don’t want to use you. I’m still going to use the core. The entity exists across time, but it always has a version of itself in the present, right? So... so, I bring the cage back over. And then I open the surface gateway while the people cross. Then, we distract the entity. We keep it here and conduct a gradual fighting retreat to the gateway. Before we leave, I’ll fire an arrow and destabilize this cage. It should set the Animancy Core inside off. But we need to be gone when that happens.”

“We’re destroying Gate Theborn?” Uva rasped.

“Yes,” Adam growled. “And then we’re fleeing.”

“Over to the surface? Where the Light-Curse will kill most of the people here? Or me, if I don’t remain hidden deep in your mind at all times?”

“What other choice do we have?” Adam cried. The air around Adam shuddered with violet mana. They needed to move again. “Godsddammit. We can...” Adam looked at the Abyssal Gateway. It was so far away, and there was nothing connecting it to the Surface Gateway anymore either. And there were still over twelve thousand people left alive in Gate Theborn. Twelve thousand crowding around the Surface Gateway. He just didn’t—

Adam paused. His head snapped to the mana core.

Shiv snarled. “They’re coming. I can see them. They’re going for the people. I’ll buy you some more time. I’ll be back if—when I... I will find a way back...”

“No, listen,” Adam said. “We’re going back to the original idea. It’s good that the entity is going for the people. It will get close to the Surface Gateway.”

Shiv paused. Uva was confused too.

“The Jealousy,” Adam breathed. “The Jealousy could be teleported into Gate Theborn through a gateway! And the gateways are connected! By the mana core. I don’t have the mana to move the Recollector. I barely have enough Dimensionality left for another ten Veilpiercers. But the mana core does. Shiv. Go. Spread your Creeping Void over the people. Keep them alive if you can. Uva! I need—”

Her strands were already shooting down toward the survivors. "I know. But you should be there in person before them. It will make your Gate Lord Synchronization faster if they can see you and hear you."

"Right. Shiv. Distraction first. Then, we need to somehow ensure the Recollector's present-period body touches the gateway. So I can teleport it across to the Vulketh Gateway, and then we need to... to stun it somehow, so it doesn't just slip back across time. Or use one of its past-selves to avoid harm."

"Then, after he finishes distracting the Recollector initially, he should cross over to the Vulketh Gateway first." Uva concentrated. "His shadows... They were enough to confuse the entities. They're lost inside his darkness."

Hope exploded inside Adam. "And we can use it to hide the cage."

Shiv grunted. "Good. We have... We have a plan... I'll go and..."

His words died on his lips as Adam embraced him. Shiv blinked. Adam pulled away after less than a second.

"What... Why?" Shiv asked, confused.

Adam smirked sorrowfully. "Because you're my bloody hero, you big, broken bastard. I'm just sorry you broke yourself for me."

Slowly, Shiv laughed. "I... will do it again... in a heartbeat."

And then, something shook beneath them as the Recollector's many selves began to shriek. Shiv spiked his field down and vanished from Adam's sight. No more words. No more time. Just a desperate plan, and little else unsaid.

"You too, Hero Uva," Adam murmured as he aimed a Veilpiercer at where all the people were. Darkness exploded out from Shiv, and they screamed as it fell over them. Adam loosed his shot before the people were swallowed by Shiv's Creeping Void. "Thanks for keeping me together."

"The honor is all mine, Hero Adam. Now. Let's go kill something far beyond our power."

Chapter 90 (I) Prevail

"You don't need to come. These orders have been placed by the Starhawk upon me alone."

"Fuck you. I'm not letting your stupid ass wander down into the darkness alone. You'll get lost."

"I have Rose."

"And you'll both end up doing something stupid. Her because she'll get pissed and lose all sense of rationality. You because you can't go three days without getting into a fight with something way out of our league. How we're still alive is a mystery, but I guess the System gives its funniest fights to its dumbest clowns. And the judge is out on whether that's you or me."

“This is different, Harlon. I can’t—I cannot tell you exactly what the Starhawk wants. But it is more than I can easily offer. The Ascendants think they’re marching to war against an Abyssal invasion, but that’s... I’ve said too much. I cannot tell you more. I can’t let you—I can’t protect you from what the Ascendants are doing.”

“And I can’t protect you if you wander off alone. Fuck off with the cryptic god-talk, Roland. I don’t care about politics. I don’t care about the Ascendants or the faith. You need me. You need Vera. And so we’re coming with you. End of story.”

“You won’t like some of the things we have to do.”

“I don’t like listening to you boss me around, but I let you do that for fifteen years.”

“Let me do that?”

“Yeah. I could have left. I could have joined any other team. Your ass is lucky to have me.”

“Harlon, sometimes your dourness makes me forget how arrogant you are. You know I mainly recruited you because I needed a Shadow like Vera, right?”

“And you got a Vanguard in the deal. Aren’t you a lucky, special boy.”

“I am. I have always been. I—Thanks for fighting with me. For all these years. I don’t know much about this world anymore. There is too little I can trust. The things I believe in diminish day by day. But I know you’re my brother. And that means more to me than I’m comfortable admitting.”

“Shut up, Roland. This soft talk is fucking up my mood. Now, get over here and give me a hug you godsdamned pussy.”

-Roland Arrow and Harlon Lowe

The entities rose, and a sea of bleakest void crashed to greet them. The survivors of the gate shrieked and pointed in horror, their eyes falling on the incomprehensible darkness that was set to consume them. At the Surface Gateway, armed mercenaries, deserters, and other individuals of status and significance clamored to escape. Yet, they remained trapped, and the gateways remained under lockdown.

With Leu and Confriga both dead, the mana core colors turned ambient and dim. Its mana decay was already setting in, and with so much of Gate Theborn’s infrastructure devastated, the reduction of the gate’s mana levels was inevitable.

But before that point, Adam could still make use of it as a weapon and as a means of shifting the entity over to where he needed it to be.

A dimensional rift tore open above the survivors of Gate Theborn as a Veilpiercer chipped a piece off the top part of the gateway. Adam emerged thereafter, his burning wings flaring bright, his mind crowned by a mess of hair-thin mana strands. Uva reached out from within him, binding him to the masses gathered, seeding them with a new candidate for Gate Lord: Adam Arrow.

“Survivors of Gate Theborn!” Adam cried. His voice didn’t feel strong enough. There was a quiver in his tone. How the bloody hell did his father address people day after day without cringing in embarrassment? “Hear me! Hear me now!”

His sudden arrival struck a shocked pause in the final district. Thousands of people were packed tight across a cluster of bridges and plazas, jammed into the fifteen or so skyscrapers that remained. This place was mostly a residential district for surfacers. That was what Adam guessed from the architecture and how a good portion of the people here were dressed. But the largest group present was the slaves. They were a dense mass at the center of the plaza, and their number included all races and ages. On their faces were expressions of dread, terror, despair, and, for a select few, acceptance.

There was no chance anyone would let them get to the gateway first, and without proper combat skills, they were no threat to the mercenaries and deserters who claimed first departure rights.

Shiv’s Creeping Void splashed over Adam, so he descended, staying ahead of the billowing waves of absolute blackness pouring out from the Deathless. In the distance, Adam saw Shiv blast through one of the few intact bridges beyond the surfer district. A series of thunderous impacts followed. Gate Theborn shook. The entities screamed their siren song of madness.

Adam swallowed. He needed to act fast. “I am going to open the gateway. If you are a surfer, I advise that you flee. But it is unlikely that most can escape—” A clamor rose, but Adam flashed his wings again, silencing them with brightness instead of sound. The Creeping Void began to spill over him, but he kept talking. His radiant wings were the last thing many people ever saw of him, and he felt Uva keeping that moment in their minds. It was a good moment. It made him look rather noble. Far more noble and confident than he was feeling right now. “However! This need not be the end. Not for the gate. And not for you. I have a plan to kill the adversary that has brought ruin to this place. But I cannot do it alone. Not as a Pathbearer. And not without your recognition.”

His voice was beginning to distort within the Creeping Dark.

"I require the mana core. I need to become Gate Lord. You may not know me! You might not believe anything I say, but right now, I tell you this: I am here. I could have fled. I could have run. I know the way beyond the gateways. I have the power to open the paths. But here I am, still fighting. Fighting despite the very terror in my veins. So help me save you. However many of you remain. Help me claim the gate, and I will do whatever I can to bring this crisis to a close. Or I will die trying!"

His voice resonated loudly, and Uva stitched and plucked her way across mind after mind. The entire world around Adam was pitch black now. Even he had a hard time seeing things, but his Divination was still imbued within the entities, and he could see them twisting and moving. They were hunting for something. But a few had broken away already. A few were coming right for him at impossible speeds.

"It's not going to be fast enough," Adam panicked. "I need to—"

Uva untangled herself from his mind. He heard her summon and land upon her shield before there came a splash of colors in the supposedly impenetrable darkness. The colors were twisting, ever-changing, and they were beautiful and terrible at the same time. Adam heard Uva cry out as the colors grew brighter and brighter, crashing against the dense haze of absolute darkness.

"I will buy us more time!" she cried mentally.

And once more, the barrier to the outside was pierced. As she did that, Adam took advantage of the opportunity and continued his impromptu speech.

“We are not without recourse! We are not beaten! Gaze through the darkness and see the brightness! The System demands strife! So I will give it a fight! Whatever it takes! Whatever I must do! Let me make my stand here! Help me help you!”

“Did you... mean to rhyme?” Uva asked, a gasp of discomfort slipping across her mind.

Adam cringed. “It just bloody came out that way—give me a break, I’m under a lot of stress.”

“I thought it sounded quite—” And then she gave a cry as something moved through the air.

The Dreamtaker laughed using Uva’s voice. “Feed, New-Dreamt. Hate. Bleed. Strike-true across present-past. Wound the Stranger. Taint the hues of its offspring-kin-slave! And gaze hard, Seeker! Gaze deep! Gaze true!”

Whatever Uva just summoned flared pale white and gold. Once more, Adam briefly caught sight of the ringed eldritch beings, and they sailed through the darkness, fading from view thereafter.

“Just do as he says!” a high-pitched voice shrieked from below. Adam blinked. Was that Siggy? He’d honestly forgotten about her existence. “Just make the motherfucker a Gate Lord so we can get through! Just do it! WHAT ELSE DO WE GOT! DO IT! FUCKING—ADAM ARROW FOR GATE LORD! WOO! ARROW FOR GATE LORD! COME ON! GET THE CORE TO START SYNCING UP WITH HIM! DO YOU DUMB BASTARDS WANNA DIE HERE?!”

And suddenly, a pressure began to build within Adam as he felt a connection form. He thrust his wings out and shot high up into the air. As he broke through the topmost layer of Shiv’s Creeping Void, he saw the mana core as it began to pulse, radiating ripples of mana at an increasing frequency.

Then, in what might be the fastest mana core synchronization ever, a notification appeared before Adam's eyes.

Gate Mana Synchronization in Progress: Adam Arrow recognized as new Gate Lord Candidate...

Adam let out a breath. A breath that turned into a ragged cry as a catastrophic wave of force smashed into him and sent him twisting through the air. Adam's head rattled as his vision spun and his ears rang. Something in his neck clicked. His helmet endured, but the whiplash rattled his brain so hard that unconsciousness took him immediately.

Down into an ocean of deepest shadows, Gate Lord Arrow fell, unaware of what had knocked him unconscious, unaware of just how hard Shiv was struggling to spare him from a worse fate.

Gate Mana Synchronization Complete: Adam Arrow recognized as new Gate Lord

2 minutes ago...

Shiv smashed through a bridge to build a final surge of momentum before the coming fight. His Creeping Void was contaminating the world fast. It was like there was an endless ocean of ink inside him, and the world was just a cup. It spread and thickened across the world in seconds, and only kept growing the longer he focused on the skill. However, his Creeping Dark didn't last long. It only endured for about a

minute without him pouring more out into the world, so as he shot past the mid-level of Gate Theborn, they rose up, freed from the void-black cloud he surprised them with earlier.

At once, fifteen of the eldritch titans broke off from the others to come rushing at him. The others went for the remaining survivors. Probably to feed on them and regain one of its pasts. However the hells that worked.

Even with his mind broken, Shiv understood the basic issues he needed to overcome to delay the Recollector long enough for their plan to work. Issues like the entity being much faster than him. Issues like it being much stronger than him. Issues related to the limits of his Chronomancy and how he wasn't exactly sure how to even hurt this thing.

So, he hyper-accelerated his personal chronology to come up with a brief plan of his own. First, he threw out thirty of his old corpses. With any luck, these corpse-decoys would fool a few of the entities and give him a chance to intercept the others. He would also attack them mainly with his corpse flail to strike them at odd angles. That should add to the confusion. He would use his dagger and Biomancy in the meantime as his main tools for offense. Deepest Edge and his Woundeaters were going to be much more effective than him just slamming himself into the entities over and over.

Another part of his mind clicked back together, and Shiv grunted. Two seconds. I got eight left before my temporal field breaks. He looked behind himself and considered his flight path. As Shiv projected his Chronomancy mana, ten points across his recent past flickered alight. Each became as if a temporal anchor he could jump to, not too unlike how his kukri worked. But still, it wasn't the same as his Chrono-Anchored Strike Enchantment. I have Chronomancy now. I should be able to replicate the Enchantment somehow. See if I can... anchor myself in time when attacking one of the entities or something.

Three seconds.

A slight crack formed along Shiv's Chronomancy field. To his delight, the world around him was pitch-black as his Creeping Void continued to spread even while time was halted. A good twelve square kilometers of space were utterly drenched in unpierceable darkness. This is going to be useful too. I just have to keep moving. Between Outside Context Problem, Momentum Core, Strider, and my flail, I just need to keep moving and hitting them. Stay alive. Be a problem. Be confusing. And my Momentum Core is close to 100 too. Shit, I hope I suffered enough to get another evolution, because I really felling need it."

Shiv let time resume. He blasted downward. He moved with certainty. The entities briefly jerked to a halt in confusion. Even so, they were still traveling fast enough to turn the air into plasma. Shiv felt the heat of their presence, and he gritted his teeth as he struggled to push through the air they displaced.

"HOW! HOW SHADOWS? WHERE DID THIS COME FROM? NO! TIME! TIME! WHEN DID IT COME! YOU! DRAGON-SKILLED ANOMALY! YOU COME? WE SING! HEAR US! WE WILL TEAR YOUR SHAPE FOR GOOD THIS TIME! TEAR YOU DEEP—AH!"

Before the entities could start singing, Shiv flung the first of his old bodies into the hand-face of the nearest entity. Hundreds of its eyes flared. Beams of all colors tore Shiv's corpse asunder. It broke into fractals of gold before twisting into other colors that splashed across existence and melted away into a rupture in reality.

The Outside consumed the decoy corpse in less than a second. Shiv shuddered. He was lucky the damn thing only hit him earlier. That hurt like hell, but at least he was still here. New problem: Absolutely cannot afford to get hit by most of those beams.

He launched more of his bodies at the entities. Mostly at the ones going for the survivors. They responded the moment his corpses drew near. Some smashed into his bodies and chased after the ragdolling corpses. Others glared his decoys out of this existence and cast them into another. With his darkness taking away the Recollector's sight, it relied on feeling and sound to react. The entities also began pulsing out temporal ripples as well. That was another advantage of having a compact

Chronomancy field. It made you hard to detect until it was too late, and concealment was Shiv's greatest advantage in this fight.

The Creeping Void 101 > 102

He shot between two of the entities as he swung his cancer flail. His weapon snaked out from his cloak. It moved like a limb, guided by his gravitic field. Shiv snarled as he strained to push through the sheer volume of air and force the entities were displacing. His cancer flail curved across a hundred meters and struck two adjacent entities on their sides. They turned on each other as a few hundred beams were exchanged between the entities.

Shiv hoped he could get it to damage itself. It didn't work. Shiv frowned. Apparently, the rules of its existence allowed it to strike at him and the physical world, but phase through itself. This is godsdamned bullshit.

He halted time again and took in the scene. Most entities were deceived, surging to assist the others in crushing what they thought to be Shiv. Some were lost in the denseness of his Deepest Void, moving in the wrong direction: back down the way they came.

But two entities were still working their way up toward the survivors—toward Adam and Uva.

Shiv's gut tightened. And then he realized they were going to intersect the same path he took down.

Shiv projected himself five seconds back in time, and his Chronomancy field snapped slightly as the spell completed. Shiv zipped back just beside one of the entities and clutched his dagger tightly. Intense heat consumed him. He was drenched in Chronomantically frozen plasma, and both his bone armor and body

struggled to adapt. He guessed he had maybe four more seconds of active Chronomancy left in him before his field broke apart again. Strangely, his Chronomancy field didn't strain so much as it shattered. Shiv wondered if that was something to do with his Skill Evolution or if it was just the way Chronomancy worked.

He blasted toward one of the entities and reeled his flail back into his cloak. His bone dagger gleamed adamantite bright as his left hand came aglow with a laceration spell. He cast his Woundeater at the second, more distant entity as he slashed his blade across the tower-sized index finger of the first. As he cut, he focused his Chronomancy and tried to chronologically anchor himself via the blow. I should be able to—

The shape of a new spell ignited around Shiv. His gravity-enhanced slash rushed through the entity's entire body—and it cried out in surprise. As he completed an action, Shiv felt one of his nearest Chronomantic anchors crash into him and imprint itself blade-first upon the entity. The number of temporal echoes he could jump back in time to shrank down to nine. One had been spent. One echo was branded on the very body of the monster he sought to slay.

For the first time, Shiv felt true power rush through his Chronomancy. This was the way his Strider of the Unbending Path was meant to be used. It wasn't just for manipulating his personal progress across time or jumping back to a previous point. The echoes weren't echoes at all. They were spell-instances he could use to anchor himself at a specific point of time—A specific point of time, performing a specific action, against a specific object or entity.

A vicious thrill rushed through Shiv. A thrill that was slightly diluted by annoyance as he cursed the System for not giving him any time to experiment or learn about his new Magical Skill. Kiss my ass, System.

"CUT! CUT!" the entity he slashed cried out. But its body deformed and curved unnaturally as his cut inflicted no damage at all. It was like he slashed at a layer of jelly.

Shiv growled with frustration. Come the fuck—

“HURT! HURT!” the other entities cried as crimson mana exploded around it. Shiv turned as his temporal shell drew close to its breaking point. He saw the entity he cast his spell at come apart. Three of its fingers had been severed. Strange, midnight ichor seeped out from it and mixed into Shiv’s Creeping Void. Building-sized pieces of the eldritch fingers dissolved into tarnished, golden dust as Shiv looked on in confused triumph.

But how? How did— Then he recalled something. The sword. It doesn’t have Absence anymore. It doesn’t have any Magical Resistance without Absence!

And then his Chronomancy field started coming apart. Fragments burst off Shiv’s body. He cursed and flung himself back across time. He managed to reel himself another second back across time before his temporal shell exploded off his body.

Force smashed into him immediately. Shiv let out a ragged cry as waves of force and friction from the entity hammered into him. His armor shook. Parts of it cracked. But, ultimately, it held. Then came the noise. Shiv’s ragged cry became a howl of overwhelming pain as the entities’ eldritch melody gnawed at his consciousness.

Tides of Chronomancy mana splashed across his body thereafter.

“HEAR! YOU!”

“SENSE YOU!”

“COMING FOR YOU!”

Shiv didn't know where he found the strength to discharge his Momentum Core, but he managed. Time stopped again. He aimed himself down—shaped more laceration spells as he prepared to descend, a concentration of the Recollector's past selves. The horizon surged toward Shiv.

It didn't surge fast enough.

Ten entities formed a line of charging hands. Somehow, they accelerated even faster. They didn't know where Shiv was exactly, but they had a good guess, they had the numbers, and they had the speed.

Shiv made it eight meters before one of the Recollectors smashed into him. His bone armor cracked apart. But it endured just enough for his flesh beneath to adapt. Shiv hissed as his right arm and leg fractured. But he managed to shift out of context just in time to avoid being blasted by the nightmarish colors flooding out from the Recollector's eyes. The colors passed through Shiv without inflicting any harm, but just seeing them broke something in his mind. He surfaced and was promptly pinned against the entity's surging form—and the damned thing was going too fast for him to resist! He tried pushing himself off the Recollector's pinky finger and barely managed to pry his upper body free.

The entities burst out from the apex of his Creeping Void and were in the open, clear air again. In the distance, Shiv saw the mana core pulse once—and saw a faint dot not far from it. The dot had burning wings and azure armor. And as Shiv noticed Adam, so did the Recollector.

“ARCHER! HURTS US! FIND HIM! KILL HIM! FIND HIM! KILL HIM! REMOVE! UNNECESSARY! TORTURE-HURT-BREAK!”

And then an anger hotter than even the plasma kissing Shiv’s body combusted inside him. “The godsdamned felling fuck you will! Stay away from him!”

Shiv’s Berserk activated. He injected all the anger he had into the Skill and barely managed to regain his ability to move. Even then, he still had to drain its momentum and discharge his core in the direction it was moving to avoid being flattened.

Adamantine Adaption 144 > 145

Momentum Core 98 > 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Gravitic Wrestler 133 > 135

Chapter 90 (II) Prevail

A massive Woundeater flashed into existence between Shiv’s hands. Its insides glittered with massive crystalline chunks containing countless lacerations. With a wild cry, he slammed it down against the Recollector. An ocean of red mana exploded out from the entity. Its fingers burst apart into pieces.

Another copy of the entity died. The others froze mid-air. A displaced series of shockwaves zipped across the airspace of Gate Theborn. A second later, Shiv watched Adam get blasted out of the sky by the entities’ sheer inertial displacement.

“HEY!” Shiv roared as his discharge ended. His broken bone armor crumbled off his body, revealing his battered, bruised, and bloodied form. “I’M RIGHT HERE, YOU GODSDAMNED ASSHOLES! COME AND GET ME!”

But to his displeasure, only two of the entities broke away to go for him. The other seven closed in on Adam like sharks racing against each other to taste the flesh of a wounded bird drifting on the ocean’s surface. Then, more emerged from the blackness below. He hadn’t stalled them nearly long enough.

Shit! Shiv’s heart thundered with desperation. He stopped time, and then immediately noticed his temporal brand bound to a distant entity. Well, at least that wasn’t a waste. His shell was halfway broken, so he only had five seconds to work with. Shiv cast his Chronomancy at the entity. He jolted across his personal chronology and exploded back into existence beside the entity, performing the very same cut he did earlier.

The entity flinched. Shiv’s temporal shell cracked, and through the gaps, he realized he was wearing an undamaged set of bone armor. Like he managed to make history forget it ever broke. More than that, he was feeling better too. His injuries were gone. And as he finished performing the cut, the anchor passed back through him. It rejoined the other temporal echoes and had ten points of history he could jump to again once more. Holy shit, I take everything back, System! I felling love Chronomancy!

The entity deformed under his cut again and turned its eyes on him. They began to glow golden, and Shiv hadn’t released enough of his Creeping Void yet. “AGH! STRIDER! ANOMALY! USED STRIDER OF UNBENDING PATH! DRAGON SKILL-UNNATURAL-IMPOSSIBLE! HELP! SELF-PAST-ME-METER-DISTANCE HELP!”

The entity’s words were breaking down to gibberish for Shiv. He decided to stop listening. He blasted it with a mana-dense laceration spell. The creature split into two with a scream before it could strike him with any of its eye-beams.

The beautiful thing about skills: You could never have enough of them to cover all your bases. And this poor bastard had no Magical Resistance without the sword.

Then, a rush of color smashed into Shiv's back. He cursed and then cast himself two seconds back in time. His temporal shell shattered again. Shiv returned to real-time, oozing darkness from his body, but the Recollector's other selves were already on him. He shifted out of context, and as they sang their terrible song, Shiv adapted by using his Biomancy to rupture his own eardrums. He let out a bark of anguish and sailed wildly through the air with all equilibrium lost, but at least he wasn't going insane anymore.

Aching coldness rushed through Shiv. He shivered. He'd shifted out of context a bit too much. His vitality was almost completely spent. Shiv emerged back into reality with a groan of effort. He cast a laceration at a nearby entity. Its body cleaved itself in half in accordance with the spell. Darkness congealed around him. The entities came forth seeking easy prey, but they lost track of their quarry as they passed into the dark.

Shiv tried flying without his ears for a second before he gave up. He had a wyrm eat his wounds and he flung it at another nearby enemy. The spell detonated against the entity, and it gave a cry of alarm but gave no other hint of pain or damage.

At least they weren't singing anymore.

Woundeater 79 > 81

And then Shiv resumed his campaign of distraction and confusion. He swung his cancer flail out again. He struck one entity on the side, threw out another body, and launched two bone drills. The Recollector's past selves responded instantly and by instinct. Strange though the eldritch being was, it wasn't that clever of a fighter. It kept falling for the same tricks. Tidal waves of heat and force crashed into Shiv from all sides, shattering pieces off his armor. He didn't care. He just needed to keep fighting until the mana core was synchronized to Adam.

Then, they could begin the next part of the plan.

Shiv spiked his gravitic field and shot toward the enemies nearest to the last surviving district of Gate Theborn. It was a small mercy; it seemed to have a one-track hyper-obsessive mind. Shiv prepared another laceration spell and groaned from vitality exhaustion. I'll drain them before I kill them with my vitality. I don't think I'll manage to survive my next death otherwise.

The Challenger is watching.

Yeah. Keeping watching, you big bastard. I'm coming for you too.

The Challenger is laughing.

Shiv smashed through tides of force and plasma, dragged along by the entity's body. He clenched his jaw as his armor burst apart. Vitality surged into Shiv—

For all of a second.

Another entity blasted out from the one drained and crashed into him.

The Recollector laughed cheerfully. “FOUND YOU!”

Shiv let out an exhausted bellow as he immediately started draining the entity he was pinned against. The eyes along the massive hand it had for a face flowed like debris on a river, and in its palm was a whirlpool leading who the fuck knew where. Pressed against the entity by the sheer weight of its acceleration, he felt himself get dragged along with its eyes toward the vortex.

“DRINK YOUR HISTORY! DRINK YOU IN DEEP AND TAKE YOU FOR THE STRANGER!”

Shitshitshit! Panic exploded inside Shiv. He tried to drain the entity’s momentum. His core filled immediately, and he discharged at the same instant he froze time. Shiv exploded off its body as it gave a frustrated shriek. All its eyes came alight. Beams tore out to greet Shiv. But he was already gone. He reverted himself back four seconds in time to his fifth temporal anchor.

Shiv blinked across the world—and found himself surrounded by nineteen different Recollectors all going in different directions. Most of them were still far from the last group of survivors, but it wouldn’t take more than a few seconds for the entities to reach the Surface Gateway. The damned entities just moved too fast. An entire section of Shiv’s temporal shell peeled away. Two seconds. Godsdammit. I need to lead them back down if I can. Keep them confused.

He released his Chronomancy. Several waves of crushing force smashed into Shiv all at once. He survived all that with mild discomfort and spiked his field down—then died as one of the entity’s clipped his head while phasing through another of its many selves.

"FELT! IMPACTED! HERE HERE HERE!" it cried. They swarmed and began blasting the space where Shiv's corpse dropped.

The suddenness of Shiv's death caught him off guard as well. One second he had been alive, the next, well, he didn't even see what killed him. He only noticed the entity as it tore through him, unleashing waves of destruction as it continued to travel. It descended, and an entire group of other entities descended with it. They all launched beams from their eyes, cleaving and lashing at reality, pouring so much color down toward Shiv's corpse that they began to disintegrate the very foundations of Gate Theborn itself.

Colors from the Outside—from a place beyond Shiv's imagination—tore a great wound into the world. That wound swallowed Shiv's corpse. Meanwhile, the actual Shiv remained silently screaming, writhing in the air as a Revenant as he tore his gaze away from the entities.

"Killed him!" the entity cried. "Finally destroyed? Didn't want to destroy, merely, merely move. Where? Where?"

And then Shiv's Revenant crashed into one of them again by pure chance. It was moving, and it didn't notice where he was. All the pitch-black miasma he left imprinted upon the world hid his every motion, and the fact that he was a Revenant made his presence even harder to detect. He felt like an ember that had been cast into a roaring forest fire, and immediately he drank deep, the vitality within the entity surging into him.

Shiv accelerated toward a new resurrection. The entity he struck writhed and screamed beneath him, alerting the others that this battle wasn't over. Notifications loaded before his eyes, and from within Shiv erupted a dense membrane of kinetic energy that layered his body with thundering shudders of force.

Adamantine Adaption 145 > 150

Woundeater 81 > 83

Gravitic Wrestler 133 > 136

The Creeping Void 102 > 104

Momentum Core 100 > 104 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Momentum Core (Master) > Inertial Overdrive (Heroic)

Inertial Overdrive 104 (Heroic)

Shiv felt his Momentum Core burst apart inside him. But instead of scattering, it spread out and suffused over his flesh and sheathed his very muscles and skin in what could only be described as a membrane of shuddering, thundering force. It constantly pulsed around him, even though he was still a Revenant, and he realized that his every motion distorted the friction in the air; made him move faster.

A shadowy cocoon formed over him. The entity he drained finally noticed his presence, and one of its eyes fell on him—too late. Shiv froze time. That didn't stop it from channeling a beam of accelerated

time at Shiv. It also didn't stop him from casting himself back in time by the span of a second. He jolted out of existence for just a moment. Most of the beam missed, the remainder of it flaying away a small section of his armor.

The entity paused, and then, flinched in surprise at his reappearance. Shiv took full advantage of its confusion. His resurrective cocoon cracked around his body, and Shiv moved with a lightness and speed greater than anything he knew before. He blasted off the entity's body and dismissed his temporal shell as he moved under the cover of his Creeping Void.

It was practically like he was gliding through the world. More than gliding, with every second he traveled, he moved faster, and never lost any of his previous speed. He spiked himself, and as he did, he kept building his acceleration, adding speed to speed, velocity upon velocity. Shiv's eyes widened. He spiked thrice more, and his acceleration multiplied as the inertial membrane shrouding his flesh grew more turbulent.

The entities fired their beams blindly. One clipped him, shattering his arm. But it did nothing to stop Shiv's acceleration as he scraped himself against its body. He spiked his gravitic field rapidly, and his speed exploded to obscene levels as he just kept getting faster, without ever slowing down. The oxygen in the air exploded as he surged. Heat licked at his flesh, and to Shiv's surprise, the world slowed drastically as his reflexes grew faster as well.

The entities were still much faster than he was, but they were lost in the dark, while his acceleration continued to build ceaselessly, unrelentingly. Shiv kept spiking his gravitic field. The air cracked with his every motion. Shockwaves bled from his slightest movements. This Skill Evolution was awesome. It granted him perpetual, building velocity. It was a direct upgrade to the Momentum Core as it let him just get faster and faster. He didn't need to absorb momentum to do this; he didn't need to discharge. Where once he sapped from the world, now he was his own source of speed.

Shiv let out a vicious, snarling laugh as he launched himself at the adversary. He formed two more laceration spells, and he shot between a group of three entities. He fired his spells at them. All three fell

apart, rendered into pieces, dissolving into tarnished grains of gold with a shared scream. Thereafter, it was like they never existed at all.

A beam cleaved toward Shiv from a kilometer above. It was a beam he wouldn't have been able to dodge thirty seconds ago. But with his Inertial Overdrive and another spike from his gravitic field, the beam became something he could perceive and react to.

Shiv pointed his gravitic field at a downward angle and pulled. The color of the beam mauled his sanity, but missed his body. Shiv laughed. Then another entity slammed into him. His right ribs shattered. But Shiv still didn't stop accelerating. He snarled as his skin tore. He left a bloody smear along the entity as it tried to react—but then he shot past it, and it lost track of him. Shiv groaned, chuckled, and then cried out as he found himself heading straight for the ground.

He smashed head-first into the already devastated bedrock of Gate Theborn. His nose broke. A bruise covered half his face. But even so, he kept drilling down at a constant speed. Stone gave way to obsidian. He blew through that too. And he kept going deeper into the earth. Nothing could stop his Inertial Overdrive.

Shiv felt like a god.

But then the first hints of discomfort graced Shiv's body. A grinding sensation lashed at his skin. The field of turbulent kinetic that shrouded his body, that coated him, and thundered around him, began to grow unbearably hot. He tried to slow down by spiking his gravitic field the opposite direction, but then cried out as he realized his perpetually accumulating speed far exceeded his strength. His bones fractured. His skin tore. His muscles snapped free from his skeleton.

And strangely, the force he applied to himself just made him faster.

Inertial Overdrive wasn't something that could easily be diverted. Shiv gritted his teeth and began pulling at an angle to alter his path, rather than pulling back in the other direction. This was far more extreme than even his Momentum Core. Momentum Core started dying down at some point. This was a problem with having extreme, perpetually increasing momentum. Turning was hell, and with every second he spent empowering Inertial Overdrive, the strain on his body built.

A searing heat seeped deeper and deeper into his meat. A building weight pried more of his bones apart.

Shiv blasted a full kilometer underground in the span of seconds. His insides were starting to burn as well. His brain was starting to cook inside his skull. It was all getting to be too much. Shiv clenched his teeth and froze time. His temporal shell had been entirely restored during his flight, and he used Chronomancy to help him adjust his trajectory.

To his astonishment, he was practically moving hundreds of meters every passing second. Nothing compared to how fast he was in halted time, but before, he could barely manage a few dozen meters with each spike of his gravitic field. He tried twisting his path some more, but as he spiked his gravitic field again, part of his skull caved under the immense force building around him. The inertial sheath was thundering against his body now. All the momentum he built up was burning him, crushing him, torturing him.

Shiv learned then why it was called Inertial Overdrive.

Because there was a limit to what all bodies could endure.

He felt his organs ignite from the inside out. His marrow combusted, the water within him began to evaporate. Shiv groaned as he tried to stop moving altogether instead of spiking his gravitic field

another way. He couldn't. Then, he tried pushing the inertial sheath that had been crushing him with all the pulsing kinetic energy it had built up around his body. To his surprise, he managed to do something with that. He managed to pop the sheath.

Shiv came to a violent and sudden halt. But all the force he carried with him had to go somewhere. An incomparably violent explosion of all the momentum he had been accumulating exploded out from him. It exploded so hard that half a dozen kilometers of obsidian, stone, and more simply ceased to be. Another enormous crater was added to Gate Theborn's lowest reaches.

Shiv gagged and coughed. Blood spilled out from his eyes, his nose, his ears, and his mouth. His body was broken, and he was on the verge of passing out. He triggered the Song of the Vigilant and immediately cast a Woundeater on himself, consuming his injuries. But that didn't replace the amount of water he lost from the intense heat earlier, and so Shiv staggered to his feet, dehydrated, dazed, and... excited.

Inertial Overdrive 104 > 105

Chapter 90 (III) Prevail

"Holy shit," the Deathless wheezed. The space above him was still pitch black; his Creeping Void hadn't even begun to fade. How many seconds had passed while he was in Inertial Overdrive? Shiv didn't know exactly, but every bit of acceleration built, his reflexes surged as well. He got fast. Fast enough that he could escape from the entities. Fast enough that his speed became too much for his Physicality and Toughness once again. There was a wonderful pleasure in using his skill. Just as there was a brutal cost if he overindulged.

It was like suffering a perpetual, constantly growing Momentum Core discharge. Even his Adamantium Adaption could barely endure this. Frankly, Adamantium Adaption was the only reason he was still alive. There was a price to pay for certain Skill Tiers outpacing the others. But wounds were just ammunition for Shiv. The entity had no Magical Resistance, and he killed three on the way down. He could still sense the others, feel their Chronomancy, hear the destructive blasts they left in their wake as they surged through the gate. The Creeping Void he left above was beginning to break, but he would replace it soon.

And more importantly, he wanted to discover something else.

I'm a Hero now, Shiv thought, so let's see what we can go do with a Heroic-Tier Reflexes Skill. Let's see if I can kill this godsdamn thing myself.

He spiked upward into the air, and his inertial sheath thundered around him, keeping the force circulating. Then, Shiv spiked a dozen more times as his speed built and never died. He dove back into his darkness just as all the entities began turning up, preparing to head toward the surface gateway. That was a mistake. You don't show your back to an enemy that's not dead yet.

Blackness trailed out from his body as he spiked his gravitic field another ten times. He was far beyond the sound barrier now. Every movement he made sent tides of flame crashing across the world. His skin caught fire and began to burn, his muscles tore, and his bones cracked. Shiv fed it all to his Woundeater, and he kept to the speed. There were four hundred meters between him and the nearest entity. It was still barely faster than him. It stopped being fast at all when he froze time. He launched his first spell into the entity, and it combusted, burst, bled, and died and as it howled out in abject suffering.

Far above, other versions of the Recollector shifted. They froze as Shiv dismissed his temporal shell and accelerated even harder. He destroyed his own body to maintain the insane speeds he was currently moving. For once, he was actually on par with the Recollectors when it came to speed.

"Come the fuck on," Shiv roared. He spiked himself again, he bit back a growl of anger alongside the pain, he fed that anger to his Inertial Overdrive and went even faster. His skin flayed off, his muscles tore free from his bones, his bones were ground down by friction itself, by the inertia building up inside of him. He was faster than the enemies now. But he wouldn't be able to endure this for long.

Song of the Vigilant was still active. He triggered his Icon of the Paindrinker just to make his anger worse, and it worked; agony and focus co-mingled. The Blessings from two gods clashed, and somewhere, somehow, Shiv felt the Composer and the Challenger notice each other. She flinched. He grinned.

Then the vision was gone. With pain and agony came anguish and rage—rage Shiv poured into his Chronomancy. Time froze dead, his armor flared with radiance, like a golden carapace come alight in the grip of the deepest abyss.

Five entities came toward him from three kilometers away. Five sang a distorted song that seared at his consciousness. Five unleashed thousands of beams, colors from a far dimension.

They were all too slow.

Shiv spiked his field again. His body was nearly torn in half. He wailed in mind-rending agony and fed that injury into a Woundeater. He cast a spell on the first entity he encountered. It split in half, combusted, tore apart, and was flayed in his stead. Once more, his flesh started breaking, and there were still four more in the distance. He spiked his field again, and immediately his spine folded backward. His ligaments practically unlatched themselves from his body, but he managed to cast a spell—managed to feed his wyrm. He snapped back into shape—barely in time to avoid a series of beams. He slipped between two entities, moving so fast they couldn't keep up with him. He cast his spell out at the second enemy, and it tore in half before dissolving into motes of time.

“FAST! HOW? SOFAST TOOFAST!”

Shiv tried spiking again, but an instinctive warning from his gut told him to stop—told him that if he did this, he would die immediately. Shiv did, but the overdrive was still getting to him. His bones were breaking with each passing second, his skin was tearing, his blood was igniting, his organs were bursting.

He had boundless ammunition for his Woundeaters. That wasn't the problem. The problem was he was still too fast, constantly accelerating, never losing any speed. He shot past the remaining three entities.

Shiv looked back and felt his temporal anchors. He didn't need to turn or stop to unleash all his built-up momentum. He just needed to go back in time. And so he reverted three seconds, three seconds out of... Shiv paused. He counted fifteen echoes. Fifteen temporal anchors he could jump to.

His anger multiplied his magic by a colossal amount.

He laughed. I need to get angry more often.

He jolted back in time. As soon as he arrived, he let out a cry of pain as his back snapped, his face tore off his skull, and his lungs collapsed. His speed was reduced as well. As with everything related to Chronomancy, it referenced his personal history. A few seconds ago in his time, he was on the verge of death while at a slower speed. Shiv fed another Woundeater as he traveled forward, adjusting movement vectors with a few tugs from his field. He cast out the wyrm; it sailed through the air, and he somehow he outpaced it. He shaped a laceration and cleaved a second entity in half with a mana-infused punch before the first one even died.

As Shiv got close to the final entity, it cried out. "No, no, can't be! CAN'T BE! Inertial Overdrive! NOT human skill! NOT EVEN MONSTER OR DRAGON SKILL! FOR TERRASQUE! ONLY, ONLY TERRASQUE! HOW? HOW YOU GET THIS?!"

And that was all it got as Shiv cast a final wyrm into it. It burst apart just as the first faint spider web of a crack spread across his temporal shell.

But there were no more entities around him. No more nearby, at least. He looked up, tried to track them, and his breath caught. The rest were surging toward the survivors, toward Adam and Uva. He had over ten kilometers of distance to travel, and he was pointed the wrong way. So he simply jumped back in time and aimed himself right. He pointed his gravitic field in the air and thrust out with it thrice more. His speed grew obscene again. His skin unlatched from his body like a parachute. The Paindrinker made what was already an agonizing experience a new kind of torture.

Unfortunately, Shiv was already half soul-burned from less than a day ago. "Six out of ten," Shiv snarled to himself. Time counted down. His flesh cracked and broke. As he went past ten seconds, half of it peeled away like a shattering egg. Within the shell, Shiv's brutalized, mangled form unveiled itself. Two wyrms were already circulating around both his arms.

He was on fire. It was getting hard to see since his eyes were melting out of his sockets. It was getting hard to hear because his eardrums were in the active process of bursting again. It was getting hard to breathe because his lungs were also incinerated on the inside. Frankly, it was getting hard to stay alive since his bones were being compressed down to a single point at his core. The kinetic energy was pressing down on him tighter and tighter.

Don't you godsdamn dare pass out! He hated his own weakness. He imagined blacking out, imagined the entity reaching the people, killing all of them, killing Adam and Uva. He remembered her screams, how her arms were torn away. He remembered how Adam's head twisted in the wrong direction. He remembered Valor. Valor, Valor wasn't... He didn't know if Valor was even still alive. He didn't know if Can Hu was alive. Shiv screamed with anguish—screamed with anguish as another portion of his mind clicked back in place.

He put all his rage into Adamantine Adaption.

Immediately, his body hardened like never before. His adaption accelerated as well. All of a sudden, instead of combusting, his skin just crackled as he passed another Woundeater through himself. Third-degree burns vanished, and what replaced them barely reached the category of second. His bones fractured, but that was all they did. He screamed, and his rageful voice echoed through time.

The entities traveling in mass toward the surfacer district froze. Massive eyes snapped in his direction, but only in his general direction because they still couldn't see, because they were still so enshrouded in darkness. But they heard him. They felt him. They felt the Inertial Overdrive building in the distance.

“COMING! ANOMALY! COMING! MONSTER-IN-FALSE-FLESH-COMING!”

He cast out two Woundeaters at the first entity he saw, and then it blinked out of place and was replaced by another one. Shiv gritted his teeth. “Motherfucker!”

He found the original, and it ran from him. The damned coward used one of its past selves to die in its stead. The other entity burst apart in the original's place like a wet burlap sack. Black blood and strange, ropey organs filled the space before Shiv. He shot through it, moving so fast he lit the entity's remains on fire before it could fully fade back into the time stream.

The others tried responding to him. They were slow, too slow. Spells flew out from Shiv. They came asunder, their bodies mutilated in the same way he was. They screamed, and their voices echoed some of his pain, but they howled truer, they howled deeper. And for once, he felt a shudder come from all the entities. It was a shudder he hadn't felt in a while. His Dread Aura jumped ten levels, and he felt someone's gaze fall on him.

Dread Aura 76 > 86

The Challenger is cheering.

The Dreamtaker smiles upon you.

The Stranger has noticed your existence.

The Eldest has awakened to regard you.

"That's right!" Shiv roared. "You couldn't break me, but now I'm gonna break you! Come back here, you tainted piece of shit! Stand and motherfucking deliver!"

Chapter 90 (IV) Prevail [BOOK 2 END]

And then a berserker rage overtook Shiv. His Inertial Overdrive spiked to new heights, as did his Adamantine Adaption, and his Gravitic Wrestler. He spiked his field constantly, blasting across entire kilometers, even while time remained frozen. More of his temporal armor shattered away. He had five seconds. Five seconds was an eternity for him. A flood of Woundeaters tore out across the world, snaking out, crashing into one entity after another.

They burst apart and died before they could react. One of them managed to fire a beam. Shiv went low and smashed into the entity. He gripped it. The Recollector cried out. Its body deformed and twisted inward, moving in dimensions Shiv couldn't fully grasp. But then he sank his Biomancy into it, and he drew its flesh outward, forced it to be three-dimensional, and then he flayed it apart using his Woundeaters.

"I'm still coming," Shiv roared. "Stand and fight!"

But they didn't turn and fight him. In fact, of the dozen or so entities remaining, they all shuddered, shivered, and then they let out a collective wail. They burst apart into rivers of gold, and they accelerated across time, across space, splashing into the original. Shiv rose through his Creeping Void. Over his shoulder was the mana core, and in the distance, the Recollector's true self hovered just over the Abyssal Gateway.

Fifteen kilometers. I think. I got this. I just need to reorient my charge. Shiv came to a halt and burst his inertial sheath. And as he did, he discharged all the momentum, speed, and force he'd been storing in himself this entire time. A massive explosion consumed the center-most portion of Gate Theborn. Whatever bridges, platforms, or rubble that still remained in that section simply disintegrated.

At the end, Shiv's temporal armor broke away from him. Time resumed. He hovered in the air, shuddering, heaving with every breath. Blood poured down from his eyes, his ears, his nose. Blood oozed out from the very pores of his skin. And he growled; the voice that escaped him was closer to some kind of animal than a man. As the final throes of Shiv's Berserk died away, his cry of pain turned into a loud howl. His soul was aching. Using two Blessings at the same time was too much even for someone like him, even for a Heroic-Tier Pathbearer. He cut the Blessings off, but the pain consuming the left side of his body remained.

That pain overrode practically everything else. Shiv tried to fight it, but he couldn't. He doubled over briefly, biting back another loud scream.

"It's nothing," he muttered to himself, lying. "Doesn't hurt at all..." And he spent a moment recovering. He kept an eye on the entity. The Recollector began to twitch and change. Its flesh was pulsing and mutating. As was its Chronomancy.

"How many godsdamn transformations do you have?" Shiv groaned.

Adam fell from the air in a stunned state, but didn't drop for long before Uva caught him.

She rose through the Creeping Void on her shield, and her body folded into the shape of a large bowl to accommodate how fast they were both moving. Without her Physicality Skill Evolution, they both would have sustained terrible injuries. Now, Adam was concussed but mostly fine. And slightly weirded out.

Uva's head folded over her unnaturally curved body like a leaf peaking over the edge of a cave entrance. "Adam? Are you alright?"

He took a moment to recover. Another immense shockwave washed over them, but where the tsunami of crushing force swatted Adam out of the air just moments ago, it curved around the eldritch dimensions of Uva's body, sparing them both.

"I... am," Adam groaned. "I think. Thank the Ascendants for your creepy but greatly effective Physicality Evolution."

"It's rather growing on me too," Uva said, her voice grim. She reshaped her body back to its original state and held Adam firm. Below, Adam saw multiple violet imprints gathering at the base of Gate Theborn. A few were turning away, making their way back up—but they halted in place briefly.

"I summoned more New-Dreamt," Uva said with a weary breath. "But they will not hold the Recollector back for long."

Adam winced as flickers of alien perspectives crossed over into his mind. The Recollector was lost in the dark. And scared. Something was smashing into it over and over again. No, someone.

He caught a flash of Shiv from their perspective. He resembled a mutilated madman in the flashing glimpses he caught of the Deathless. Both his hands were aglow with Biomancy spells, but he was also veiled in a set of fractured, golden armor.

Then, all at once, the Recollector's past selves began dying

. They burst apart—one winking out of existence after another, all across the gate. They split asunder, were ripped and torn and boiled and scattered apart by Biomancy. For a moment, their pain was Adam's pain as he gasped and choked. But the scenes winked out, and all the Divination imprints began to vanish. All except for one.

In the far distance, the original Recollector rose out from the darkness near the Abyssal Gateway. A few kilometers away from it, the tiny silhouette of a man speared up from the darkness below, halting in place to face the eldritch being. Then, a massive explosion erupted from Shiv and unleashed a globe of destruction that spread out for a good eight kilometers before it finally ceased.

Uva and Adam both stared slack-jawed at the titanic showdown for a moment. And then a notification sent them both scurrying into action.

Gate Mana Synchronization Complete: Gate Lord Arrow has been recognized.

An incredible surge of pure mana flooded Adam, the effect greater than any rush of adrenaline.
"Gateway! Down! Now!"

Uva descended. He shot out of her arms. More darkness spilled out from Shiv, spreading across the gate. But she didn't need to see to gaze into the Outside. And Adam didn't need to see to shape Dimensionality.

Overhead, the mana core of Gate Theborn came alive with a rumbling roar, and the first flakes of snow began to fall...

He spiked himself toward the entity, and the kinetic energy infusing his inertial sheath rumbled to life with a satisfied purr. He spiked himself seven more times in rapid succession. He fed his current injuries into a Woundeater and developed new ones. As he accelerated, he thought back to the memories that made him so enraged, trying to trigger his Berserk again.

"Come on," he thought to himself. He remembered the screams. He remembered what it did to his friends, what it did to the ones he treasured.

"Come on," Shiv growled, the first rush of hate entering his voice. A sight of Uva's dismemberment hit him over and over. The memory of Adam screaming as the entity tried to tear his head off. Valor's broken form. Can Hu, unmoving. How it tortured him over and over and over, even as he screamed, even as his mind broke. An incoherent bellow escaped Shiv. He induced Berserk himself again. His Inertial Overdrive detonated with more kinetic energy than ever. A wake of cascading force and traveling fire followed him.

Fuck the plan, fuck any kind of strategy, fuck whatever they needed to do with the Animancy Core. He was gonna kill this thing dead. He was gonna break it with his bare felling hands and rip it open and drink its godsdamn eldritch entrails!

Shiv accelerated. Everything below him split apart. He kept going.

Yet, even as Shiv drew closer, the entity didn't move. The Recollector shuddered in place as its body trembled with building wavelengths of gold that suddenly blasted out. Chronomancy splashing over him, but it didn't displace Shiv. It didn't do anything other than extend outward. More than that, the waves were flaking apart. The entity's Chronomancy was dissolving! For a moment, Shiv thought it was about to die, and deep in his rage-addled mind, he let out a laugh of glee.

But then all the eyes on its body swirled. They glided across its massive hand-like face and spiraled into the vortex at the center of its palm. And just then, the underside of the entity snapped upward. All its finger folded back. Bones jutted out, bones that hatched, a deluge of black ichor into the open air. If Shiv hadn't been caught in the throes of Berserk, he might have stopped. He might have asked what it was doing. He wasn't rational at the moment. He kept spiking forward, faster, faster, faster. Both of his arms dislocated. His legs broke. He still went faster.

Adamantine Adaption 150 > 151

Then the vortex at the center of the entity's face-hand inverted outward. A massive eyeball surfaced, an amalgamation shaped from all other eyes. The grand oculus glittered with kaleidoscopic radiance as Shiv got within a hundred meters. Just then, the Chronomancy field around it solidified. It tried to halt time the normal way, holding everything within the expanse of its Chronomancy still, but Shiv smashed through its field. It was wide. He was dense. His Skill Evolution made him a temporal fortress unto himself. He was made to kill other Chronomancers.

Parts of his armor broke. Its Chornomancy tore.

The entity reared back, it shrieked, and all its broken bones collapsed underneath its body, becoming as if columns of spider-like legs created from snapping joints of white. Its skin dangled behind it, spewing oily black substance into the world, and through it all, the entity began to burn. It began to burn in earnest, igniting in a golden blaze as Shiv felt the flame spread across its Chronomancy. Time itself came afire, and all things within reach of its mana felt an uncanny heat.

"Will not let you kill, murder, break, eat, consume, destroy me. Will not, will not," the entity whimpered. It channeled a beam from its enormous eye. The world vanished into a blinding spiral of colors. Shiv froze time himself and spiked upward. But to his surprise, the entity kept moving with him as its Chronomancy adapted to his pace immediately.

Its eye-beam tore across Gate Theborn. A chasm opened within the world and nearly swallowed Shiv. He launched himself back in time and just barely dodged it.

"HAHAHA! NO! NO! NO!" another voice shrieked. It sounded weirdly like Uva. "NO CALLING THE STRANGER! FINISH THIS! DIE HERE! DIE ALONE! DIE FOREVER!"

The entity wailed. Then it suddenly inverted across time. It blinked beside Shiv and slashed at him with one of its bones. He let out a wild roar of pain as it cut off his left leg, misjudging his position. Then the Creeping Void splashed over it, and it missed its next shot entirely.

He cast a Woundeater at it. But then it jolted out of existence. Somehow it went from being right next to him to a full kilometer off by his left. And then it jolted again, and it reappeared right underneath him and launched itself up. Shiv responded by casting himself back in time a full second and slamming into the entity.

As he crashed against it, Shiv imprinted it with one of his temporal echoes. But as he struck its body, its center mass curved inward and out of his way. He slipped through before he had the chance to do anything. Once more, the entity moved, and this time, Shiv noticed something: it moved as if riding the currents of its burning Chronomancy. It was sinking into its burning, fading magic, re-emerging at any other point within the expanse of its mana in an instant. Every time it did that, its field also shrank a little. How it could do that, if it was natural at all, and if he could replicate that, Shiv didn't know.

And he couldn't know right now. He couldn't focus. All he wanted was to rip the entity apart.

He cast himself back in time again. His armor was half destroyed. He charged at the entity. But this time, rather than firing a massive beam blindly due to Shiv's Creeping Void, it swung out with every single one of its jutting, broken, jagged limbs. To his astonishment, it moved faster than he did. And one of the bladed joints clipped him along the back, unzipped him from neck to groin. He split in half—but he still didn't die. Berserk kept him going even as his organs untangled from his body.

Shiv shrieked with agony as the entity shot away behind him, rushing for the Surface Gateway. "MUST GO! NEED TO GO NOW! NOW HAVE TO RUN! FLEE! NEED TIME! RUNNING OUT OF TIME-FLESH-BLOOD-LIFE! ENOUGH! NEED TIME!"

As the enemy fled, Shiv gaped at just how fast it moved. It tore across the world in a blurred instant. He guessed it was probably at least ten times faster and stronger than before. With how its flesh bulged and strained, all the other entities seemed to be stacked inside it, pooling their collective power.

Godsdamned—bullshit! Shiv thought through his berserker haze. He reacted. He cast himself at the entity. His armor shattered as he jumped across time to his imprinted anchor. He slammed into the entity once more.

His Inertial Overdrive was reverted to an earlier stage. His Berserk refilled. But even with all that, even with Berserk, even with Inertial Overdrive, and his gravitic field, it pushed him back.

Shiv let out a hoarse cry. He spiked his field ten more times against the entity. His body began to dissolve into bloody mist. He spiked three more times, and his organs burst out from his succumbing flesh. Blood sprayed out from his orifices. The entity spasmed in place. It slowed. Its massive eye glared at him. He struck it. His fist bounced off without doing any harm. He let out a cry of frustration, of exhaustion, of effort, of pain, of everything he had left. He spiked again and nearly crushed himself to paste.

And then the ringed creatures Uva summoned earlier crashed into it. Their bodies exploded against the entity, detonating in chasms of glowing brightness. Deep wounds lined the entity. Parts of its Chronomancy simply ceased to be. It let out a shriek and then blasted Shiv with a beam of color.

He heard himself scream. He saw glorious shapes and colors and things he was not meant to know. His mind teetered on the brink of madness. But then a counter-color slammed into the entity's gaze. Uva rose up behind Shiv on her shield. She was howling with effort. More and more hues flooded out from her eyes, clashing against the entity as she cast her mana strand into its mind.

"NO! SEEKER! AWAY! AWAY! SEEKER! STOP!"

Uva reached deep, and she spasmed. Her eyes rolled as blood sprayed from her orifices. Shiv's stomach plunged, but then the entity started seizing as well. "Gateway!" she choked out. "Get it to touch the Surface Gateway!" She tore at the entity's very consciousness, but it seemed being inside it was near torture for her as well.

Shiv blinked. Through the forest of his rage, he barely understood her. But he knew what a gateway was. And he knew how he was going to get the entity there. Even with all his strength, rage, and more, it was

much stronger and faster than him. Berserk had him. He couldn't think of using a Biomancy spell, didn't have the rationality to plan, so he acted on instinct. Shiv spiked to the right and parried the entity over him.

Frictionless Vector 59 > 61

Frictionless Vector triggered. It exploded across the world, and he clung onto it with his field. Uva dove into its mind. Together, he pounded its exterior while she tore at its ego. As his Inertial Overdrive was still going against the entity, he induced a constant drag behind it, allowing him to twist its movement direction. Uva kept it from jumping across time, from responding to him. Flashes of clashing color pulsed out from the insides of the entity's mind as it screamed across the skies and came crashing down at the Surface Gateway at alarming speeds.

"NO!" the Recollector screamed. It projected a version of itself into the past, and Uva snapped free from its body as Chronomancy exploded around it. The entity tried blasting her with its gaze, but Shiv twisted it just enough that it missed, and the beam tore across the world in a maelstrom of destruction. But then the other entity curved through the air and came for him! There was no way he could—

A corrosive arrow plunged into the entity's eye. Both it and its clone screamed. The clone tried to respond, but a beam of crushing frost slammed down and shattered it from on high. The mana core roared. The world grew horribly cold in a near-instant. The original entity writhed, and Shiv saw how perfectly aligned it was with the gate in the distance—but he was still accelerating in the wrong direction.

His rage broke. His anger was spent. Shiv popped his inertial sheath.

A second explosion tore through Gate Theborn. Uva's shield folded around her as her body went flat. She was spiked into the ground. Shiv liquefied himself with the inertial discharge. But with his death

came a wave of force like no other, and it launched the stunned Recollector across two kilometers of space in an instant.

It tore through the tops of buildings, eviscerating anything it came into contact with. Waves of force launched thousands of screaming people off their feet, and the entity clipped the top of the Surface Gateway. Just barely.

Just enough.

Shadowy mana spilled out from the gateway and wrapped around the entity. A layer of distortions consumed it, pulling it across space and time. In an instant, it blinked from the Surface Gateway and was teleported.

Not to the surface, but to Vulketh.

And a second after it was teleported, a second pulse of teleportation followed as well.

It took Adam more than a lot of effort, but he managed to figure out how to rearrange the dimensional routes between each of the gateways. As such, he conditioned the Surface Gateway not to connect to the surface at all. Rather, it would temporarily redirect an entity from the Surface Gateway to the third gateway as an exit. More than that, he conditioned the terms of this activation to be upon contact.

And as soon as he finished with that, his heart nearly leapt out of his throat. The damned creature was right there, moving fast and about to smash into him. Holding it back were, against all odds, Shiv and Uva, tearing into its mind and body.

Just looking at the thing scraped at Adam's sanity. Without Uva shielding his mind, he was feeling himself coming undone. Feeling his mind break apart. But with how the people were screaming, they weren't handling its presence even worse. But still, Adam Arrow was a Pathbearer. And before madness took him, he would die a Pathbearer. He sucked in a sharp lungful of air and nocked an arrow. His Dimensionality screamed as he strained his mana to the very brink after all the effort he spent on the gateway. He dipped his Veilpiercer in Necromancy.

He exhaled. And he fired.

He nearly blacked out then. But the arrow passed through space and struck the entity. It reeled back. Its cry roused him. Its cry filled him with willpower. And then Shiv fucking exploded. A massive, catastrophic impact blew out both of Adam's eardrums and knocked him off his feet. As he lay there, he saw the entity clip the gateway and vanish. He didn't waste any time. He rolled over and touched the gateway himself.

And a second later, the molten waters of Vulketh crashed against Adam's Magical Resistance while the entity writhed and burned.

Both of them burst out from shadowy shrouds of Dimensionality. Its mass was colossal, confused. And it displaced so much molten fluid. And Adam, though in immense mental pain, was exactly prepared for the present moment. He flared his wings, and to his satisfaction, they still worked underwater, well, under the molten ocean that comprised Vulketh's inner depths. There, he positioned himself right in front of the elevator shaft he had corroded earlier in preparation for this.

Within, the Graven Cage crackled with malicious color.

The Gate Lord shaped his last arrow, the last arrow he had the mana to prime. He prepared himself. The entity shifted and noticed him. And though Adam's sanity quavered an inch toward the brink, he spat in its direction and loosed his shot.

“NO!”

It moved toward him. It struck his armor. Adam was blasted back through the gateway.

The last thing he saw was the entity consumed by a flash of truly blinding light. The Gate Lord exploded out from Vulketh and was thrown back through the Surface Gateway.

As he tumbled and bounced across the ground, he coughed up blood and felt things inside him break. But he was alive. He was—

The entity reappeared in a flash of Dimensionality.

It howled as a hundred grasping limbs came for him.

Despair consumed Adam.

But that emotion quickly became confusion as the entity began to flicker in and out of existence.

“WHAt—doNW NO! FNAGHNT—SOUL-BREAK-BURN-DIEEE!”

And then, with a final blink, the entity seared a deep imprint onto reality and faded out of existence.

But still, he could hear it screaming. Still. Never-ending. It was like part of it had been meshed into the fabric of existence from the Animancy blast...

Adam vomited another mouthful of blood and just stared. Stared as he lay upon a mess of moaning bodies. Stared as the entity didn't come back, didn't jump across time.

“We—we did it,” he breathed. He laughed. He started sobbing. “We—oh, shit! Shiv! Uva!”