

Deathless 91

Chapter 91 (I) Deliberate [BOOK 3 BEGINNING]

Say you manage to capture a gate, a city—hell, even just a town. Now the question comes, can you keep it? This is a question most people don't really ask themselves. Most people also don't really besiege towns, gates, or cities, so they have no experience with the matter. But let me tell you, the story doesn't end after you take a gate. In fact, the story probably only begins.

Now that the fun part of watching most of your friends die in a brutal assault is over, you get to deal with the misery of rounding up the remaining defenders. Some advise against just killing them all. It's stupid. Pathbearers are worth money, and the stronger they are, the more their allies or even enemies are willing to pay. If you just execute a Heroic-Tier Pathbearer, that's kind of a waste.

Sure, it'll take the enemy off the board, but frankly, if you manage to incapacitate them, that's gonna feed your army for a year or two. And who knows? Today's enemies are tomorrow's allies, and the same thing goes the other way around.

But between the point where you just conduct a massacre and make sure that everything is settled neatly and brutally. That, or you arrange for everyone to be sold back to their original companions, faction, owners, whatever. That means you have to hold them. And you have to hold the gate, town, city, whatever. This is where things get a little miserable. For you see, the people you just sieged, they don't much like you. They don't much like your forces breaking in, torturing them, and butchering their loved ones.

And they definitely wouldn't like you if you or the dipshits you command end up doing “funny” things to them. Funny things that will end with mana bombs going off inside your barracks, mass poisonings, or some of your people ending up getting their throats slit in the night. And so you spiral into reprisal, and we all know how that goes.

Well, maybe I shouldn't say that. Some of us clearly still need to learn. Repeat after me, kids: "The barbed-wire dildo that is cruelty will end up fucking me in the ass, and the System loves sado-maso shit."

You think that's a bit crass? Well, welcome to Integrated existence.

But then there are the special cases. Maybe the enemy is not quite beaten, or maybe you only took the gate by surprise, and it's still connected somewhere else. The war is not over. It's never over. Peace is the true challenge. And the thing about peace is, it's a brittle, unstable thing. It has to be enforced by power.

So. When you take a place, make sure you clench your fist tight.

-The Days of the Siege by Gatebreaker Chun

Inertial Overdrive 105 > 108

Gravitic Wrestler 136 > 140

Adamantine Adaption 151 > 155

The Creeping Void 104 > 108

Strider of the Unbending Path 119 > 122

Revenant 40 > 41

Outside Context Problem 58 > 60

Woundeater 81 > 83

Berserk 9 > 17

Shiv was dead again, dead at his own hands, dead for overabusing his inertial sheath to a level his body just couldn't sustain, even with his rage-enhanced Berserk mode. But it had been worth it. He watched as the entity smashed into the gateway, disappearing in a pulse of crawling darkness veiled by static distortions.

A moment later, Adam pulsed through as well, and Shiv's insides hardened. He hoped the new Gate Lord was prepared for this. He hoped that everything he did would be enough. But for now, he needed to drain something, or someone.

He moved through the air, and as he did, his inertial sheath began to thunder with greater intensity. Without a body to direct a gravitic field with, he still wasn't quite as fast as he was at baseline, but the ease at which he glided through the air was staggering. Shiv winced as he regarded the state of the last surviving district.

One word could describe Gate Theborn: destroyed. At its base, there was a crater that went down for kilometers. The edges were curved in an uneven accumulation of rubble, and several teleportation anchors could be seen, slightly dented but otherwise preserved and intact. The hanging city, held together by extended bridges, platforms, plazas, and more, was no more, except a final section, the surfacer district, which was also mostly rubble now, thanks to Shiv's violent clash with the entity.

Thousands of vitality signatures glittered below. Thousands were buried in the rubble, scattered across the ground, writhing, moaning in pain. And Shiv felt disgusted. Nausea crawled through him, but he didn't have a stomach, so he couldn't quite throw up. It seemed like no matter how hard he tried, no matter what he did, someone paid for any conflict he was involved in. The System was a cruel overlord. Weakness was punished. Weakness was fatal. And should the truly powerful face each other while you were in the vicinity, while you were lesser than they, a price would be reaped.

As he approached, however, the gateway to the surface flared again. A burst of shadowy mana vomited out a single shape, the shape of a man that shot across the bridge connected to the gateway. He slammed through rows of people, sending them flying into the air, but he seemed out of it. Blood erupted out from Adam's mouth as he tore through an entire mob of mercenaries. They splattered apart against his armor, and Adam finally ended up stopping dead against someone with High Adept Toughness.

Adam was hurt. Shiv accelerated through the air—but just then, the entity somehow emerged once again.

Shiv's thoughts ground to a halt, and his insides twisted with hatred and anger.

As he aimed himself toward the entity once again, he saw that it was glowing for some reason, vibrating with a faint blue sheen that masked the rest of its body. Shiv didn't care. He was going to drain it, and he

was going to kill it, no matter what it took. He was going to tear it in half with his Biomancy, damn if the mana strain killed him thrice over.

His mind entered a battle trance of rage. His temporal shell flashed around him. Time stopped. Then, he had an echo of his past pinned to the entity. He could use that! And more importantly, he was still alive when the echo was active. A feral thrill came ablaze within Shiv. He grinned. Maybe this was a way to avoid needing to drain people. Maybe he could avoid dying altogether by casting himself into the past?

Shiv projected himself towards the anchor without hesitation.

This proved to be a terrible mistake.

His soul went one way. His vitality went another. As the two substances were bound together, Shiv's Vitae tore down the middle. He screamed. Rose screamed. His unstable vitality splashed out and dissolved as it bled from his wounded being. Within, two of his skills warred against each other, on one side the Unique Revenant, on the other his Master-Tier Chronomancy. Shiv stopped the act before either skill could shatter, but the damage was done. And it was brutal. The entire thing hurt almost as bad as immolating his body with Necromancy.

Almost.

As he writhed in the air, struggling to regain his bearings, he watched as the entity flashed with a flare of blue, and then faded. He didn't know what was happening, and he was in too much pain to focus. Too much pain. Shiv's mind stopped working. Coldness bled into him as his Vitae poured out...

Soon, they both started fading out of existence.

Adam Arrow didn't quite know where Shiv was. And the brutal internal bleeding he suffered from didn't make focusing any easier. There were people all around him. There was blood smeared against his armor. He noticed then that he'd probably liquefied a few people just from his sheer speed alone. The damned monster had hit him hard. When the Recollector smashed him back through the gateway, he was going at colossal speeds, speeds fast enough to render him a projectile that broke the sound barrier. His armor was Legendary. The other Pathbearers lined up in front of the gate were most certainly not.

The results were grotesque.

How the... bloody hell did Shiv take any of this damned thing's hits... Adam gagged.

He tried not to look at the gore-splattered bridge as he took to the air with fiery wings. If he saw the death he caused—No. Not him. The entity did that. It should... But what if he dodged? What if he was faster? He needed to be faster. He needed to be better! He wasn't enough. Even in the end, there was still a final wound inflicted on his pride.

He wheezed as another mouthful of blood spilled out from him, half of it coming out of his nose. Adam wasn't just going to need to save Shiv's life; he was going to have to save his own via Shiv. His armor barely spared him, but inside, inside he felt like he was soup, like bones were dancing through his flesh, cutting him with every movement. He didn't even want to imagine the state of his organs. I just need to last, Adam thought. Just... just a few moments.

Against all odds, he focused his Divination, using it in tandem with his Seer of Horizons. A violet field exploded out from him, washing over the world, highlighting things he didn't notice before. Once more,

divination was complex, chaotic. He tried to pick out the exact details, and everything he focused on began to hammer his mind with varying perspectives, with lines of text he couldn't fully decipher. It was like causality itself was trying to tell him something, something he didn't have the intellect or the understanding to tease out yet.

But Shiv wasn't that hard to tease out. No, Shiv, ultimately, was an imprint, a weird flickering imprint on the surface of reality that presently didn't have a body and was rapidly fading as a deluge of substance

poured out from him. "No, no, no, no! Shiv, Shiv, Shiv!" Adam cried out. His wings roared. He blasted through the air toward Shiv.

Wings of the Starhawk > 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

It was still too slow. Even as he felt another level pass through his Wings of the Starhawk, even as another Evolution drew close, he was still too slow. But he didn't think of that now. All he thought about was saving his—what even was Shiv to him anymore? After all this, after all the blood they'd spilled together, after watching the other man die for him time and time again, fight so desperately to keep Adam alive, what were they to each other? And why was the world so intent on torturing both of them?

His mother being trapped in Shiv's soul, the ritual, their struggle together...

Adam pushed it all out of his mind. Thinking was for later. Right now, Shiv needed him. Uva needed him. Gate Theborn and Blackedge needed him. He came to a halt just before where Shiv's Revenant was. He reached out, pressing his hand into the near-transparent entity without hesitation, and immediately he felt a rush drain out from him.

It was like experiencing the worst fever of his life, and it kept going. The strange force kept sapping him, inebriating him of all his faculties. His senses lessened, his strength faded, even his reaction slowed.

Vitality. Vitality was the shape of your life, the shape of your existence. Valor said one's vitality could recover so long as they didn't die, but it sure as hells didn't feel good at all.

But then again, it probably didn't feel good for Shiv to die over and over and over.

"I still don't know how you're sane after all that, you big cockroach of a bastard," Adam muttered.

Seconds passed. Adam nearly blacked out, darkness creeping along the edges of his vision, the vitality being drained from him not helping with his existing wounds. Before he fell back, though, a hand gripped him, a hand that burst out from a dark cocoon and held him in place. That same hand cast a crimson serpent into Adam's body, and suddenly the young lord felt a detonation of freshness rush back into him. His wounds faded like they'd never been. He was still weak, he was still slowed, but he was—

Shiv looked terrible. He was bleeding still. Even after resurrecting, he was bleeding so much. Blood gushed from a massive wound lining his chest, and he was utterly nude. The fight against the entity had disintegrated all his clothes, but Adam noticed the sheer extent of Shiv's disfigurement much more than his nudity.

Adam gagged at the sight of his injuries. The soul-burns... And the wound...

Then, to make matters worse, Shiv's eyes glazed over as his Woundeater burst apart. He shuddered and vomited blood all over Adam's chest before falling over against the new Gate Lord. Adam grabbed him firmly but gently, taking care not to touch the worst of his wounds. Shiv groaned. He was shivering, clearly bleeding to death.

Adam flapped his wings and swiftly carried Shiv over to the final remaining district of Gate Theborn. The last few platforms and half-toppled buildings extended out in a wide platform from the Surface Gateway. Adam laid Shiv on the ground at the center of a badly ruined plaza. He tore some bedsheets that were scattered on the ground to cover Shiv's body.

The dense masses of survivors backed off from their new Gate Lord, clearing away from the Deathless that had struggled against the entity for them. Adam looked down at Shiv. The younger man was shaking. The left side of his body was mostly a charred ruin, and now he had a wide and ugly gash lining his chest. As Shiv moved, his wound opened further. Adam could see the gleam of metallic bone, could see the shine of adamantite flesh split wide open. Shiv's blood stopped welling for a moment, and his body began to glow with Biomancy. "Adam," he gagged. Blood splurged out from his mouth. "I need... I... Just keeping my own blood pumping... Hard to..."

"It's okay, it's okay," Adam said. It wasn't okay. He was hyperventilating. He had no understanding of Biomancy. He had no capability of helping Shiv whatsoever. He knew even less about the limits of Shiv's resurrective skill. He wasn't sure if the Deathless would be able to come back to life again in his current state. "Biomancer!" he cried out. "Is anyone here a Biomancer?"

No one approached. No one responded. The remaining mercenaries bunched together on the bridge to the Surface Gateway stared wide-eyed at him. And then, from the group, he saw a face, the face of a goblin. Her expression was ashen, and she held her arm as if it was broken. "Siggy! Siggy!" he cried out. He pointed at her, and she reeled back as if someone just slapped her across the face with a belt. "Just get over here, dammit! Get over here!"

A moment of indecision washed through her features, but then she shot forth, moving on fast feet. "Yeah, Gate Lord! Guys, this is Gate Lord Arrow. He's the one I've been telling you about! He's the guy—"

"Never mind that shit!" Adam cried. "Look—get me a Biomancer. Get someone to help."

And then a hard hand grabbed Adam, a hard hand that shuddered with a layer of thundering force. Adam groaned as he felt something smash hard into his body over and over again. Then, the inertial sheath dissipated.

Shiv gritted his teeth. "Sorry, it's hard to—Inertial Overdrive... Just builds... Can't focus." He was slurring his words, and his eyes were rolling. His body was still glowing with a brilliant red. He was channeling so much Biomancy mana it was starting to become visible for Adam as well.

"Okay, it's okay," Adam said. He cupped Shiv's face and made the large brute of a man look him in the eye. "You're going to be fine. You're going to be alright."

"I need to focus," Shiv growled. He clenched his jaw. "I need to... I'll keep myself alive, but I won't be able to help you. I fucked myself up bad, Adam. I tore myself. I tried to jump across time... but I didn't have a body. The skills didn't know how to work together—I was just trying to help you and... and..."

"It's okay. It's okay. That's okay," Adam repeated the word over and over again. It was more for him than Shiv. Shiv wasn't just bleeding materially—Adam saw how his soul was bleeding earlier. And the only one who knew anything about soul wounds was... Valor. Fuck! "Do... do whatever you need to."

Adam reached out and grabbed Siggy by the shoulder. He drew her in close, rougher than he'd wanted. The goblin flinched, terrified. "Find him a Biomancer! Find him as many people with Biomancy as possible. Doesn't matter what Tier. Keep him alive. Do you understand me? And if he dies, let him drain from you. Let him drain from anyone here. Anyone!" Adam shouted. "Anyone! This is my first decree as Gate Lord! Do not let him die! Do not let him die or I will bring the godsdamn mana core down on every bastard mercenary, slaver, and butcher I see! You are responsible for his life!"

Chapter 91 (II) Deliberate

Adam was screaming now. The people flinched away. Adam blinked, realizing the threat he'd just levied. The threat he just levied on all the slaves, on all the innocent people, on everyone who didn't even have anything to do with this. But what choice did he have? He needed to keep Shiv alive no matter what. He couldn't just let him die. He wouldn't survive the shame of it.

"You are not going off to the other side! Do you hear me?" Adam cried. He seized Shiv by a short crop of hair. "Do not die!"

Shiv barely suppressed a whimper, but then a mocking smile actually crept over his twitching face. "Is that some kind of order, Gate Lord?"

"Yes! And it is a command. Do not disobey me. Do not die. Drain from them. Drain from any of them if you do pass. I'll be back. I need to go... go..."

Shiv grunted and hissed with pain. "Uva... Go find Uva."

And with Shiv's blessing, Adam shot off. He still had worry inside his gut, but Uva... he didn't know where she was. In the chaos, he lost track of her. She left to help Shiv. He felt her mind peel away from his as she cast herself into the entity's consciousness.

Gods, diving into an eldritch entity's consciousness. He hoped she wasn't broken. He hoped she wasn't insane. If she went, then there who else to protect them from enemy Psychomancers? Who else would question his plans and make deadpan remarks at him? What would happen to the disgusting romantic overtures that kept happening around him? How would he face Shiv? Ikki? The Composer? Any of the others?

How would he face himself?

If Shiv died... If Uva died... If both of them were gone, if he couldn't save either of them... A weight of creeping despair settled inside Adam.

System! he intoned. He prayed directly to the architect of his strength and misery. He prayed to a thing that didn't speak to them aside from notifications and blessings of power bestowed upon their very souls. System! he cried internally. I've done everything I could! I've struggled! I've given you a fight! I slew something that I had no business killing! Do not take them from me!

And as if to taunt him and to mock his declaration, rather than sending him anything useful, it displayed a few special notifications:

Lord Scorn has noticed the act of terrorism inflicted upon his home.

The Lords of Law have noticed your usurpation of Gate Theborn.

The Stranger has noticed your murder of its offspring.

The Stranger cries—

Adam screamed so loud, the last notification shattered before his eyes. He cried out as he clutched his head. Then, there was the sound of something ripping apart. Adam turned his gaze as something started slithering up into reality from the corner of his eyes.

Mana boundaries to semi-Integrated dimensions thinned.

“What?” Adam muttered. What in the Broken Moon did that mean? And then he felt something.

The bottom of Gate Theborn was little more than a crater. So much had been destroyed, and the destruction ran so deep that the third gateway wasn't even truly connected to anything anymore. It was just a portal hovering there in the air, a flat plate of shimmering dimensionality mana. However, a tinge of Animancy-blue began to leak through, and then that tinge faded. A sprout of darkness and other colors extended out from the gateway to Vulketh. The sprout slithered free, and along its length, new colors began to bloom. New organs, limbs, and eyes. Eyes like those possessed by the Recollector grew across the world like cancerous smears. Just seeing it made his sanity reel.

But Adam, more than terrified, was utterly exhausted by this bullshit. Though his mind shook, his frustration hit a boiling point first.

"Come the fuck ON!" he roared at the world—at the System in particular. "I JUST FELLING KILLED ONE ELDRITCH ENTITY! DO I LOOK LIKE I CAN DO ANOTHER?!"

Something tore its way into Gate Theborn, starting from the Vulketh Gateway. The world ripped like a piece of paper as it traveled upward. The many eldritch eyes unlatched from where they were, and through a rift that revealed countless drifting colors all beyond Adam's comprehension, emerged a colossal shape. He couldn't call it solid, he couldn't call it fluid, he couldn't even call it gaseous. It felt like it was all three at the same time, or whatever the entity wanted it to be. Its body had many eyes as well.

They glided along its form, not so different from the eyes that moved on the hand-head of the Recollector, but these eyes were larger, they glowed brighter, and they peered right at Adam.

Worse, this new entity just kept flooding forth. It dwarfed all architecture within the gate as it slid over into the world. And with it came a flood of colors. Colors that didn't belong in this world. Colors that infected reality and twisted the very fabric of existence. It was like the world was a canvas, and the colors were ink. A new horizon was being painted before Adam, and it wasn't of Gate Theborn. Or maybe it was simply unmaking parts of Gate Theborn and replacing it with parts from elsewhere.

From the Outside.

"Kill you, kill you, eat you, break you, wear you, wear you, wear you, wear you, wear you," the entity whispered. Adam's stomach twisted. He puked while flying as the pitch of the words clawed at part of his mind.

More and more of the entity pulled through the massive, widening chasm. The entire middle of Gate Theborn was now torn open, and there was still more of the entity coming through. Its body, if it could be even described as such, was ridged with gleaming teeth that sang, and between those revolving jaws were eyes. So many drifting eyes. So many colorful eyes. So many eyes, all staring at Adam. And then came the hands, so many hands, breaching out from it. Hands that resembled the Recollector's head.

Existence quivered. Adam felt madness close in. He also just sighed and started firing his Spellstring.

Arrows charged with lightning, force, fire, frost, mind, and more vanished into the entity. As he fired, he prepared to cast his Divination mana—he still had to find Uva. Then, a pillar of light erupted a kilometer away. A spiral of colors rose into the air, and Adam flinched back with a cry of pain as his mind reeled.

Godsdamned eldritch bullshit won't end! Adam's divination began to scream incoherent details at him. The System responded by dumping broken text into his mind, and as more of the Outside leaked into Gate Theborn. He tried to keep his focus away from everything that was happening—and that's when he noticed Uva hovering within the pillar of light. In fact, the pillar was formed around her, bleeding forth from her gaze. Because of course it was. Because a nightmarish being residing in your eyes could only end poorly. But what the bloody hells were they supposed to do otherwise?

Then, as the pillar of light churned and changed into a tide of shifting colors, a voice came. "Stranger," the thing that used Uva's voice called out, "retract your high-spawn-offspring-vessel. Do it now. Wrong-bad-incorrect-impossible for us to say. The System has deliberately weakened the veil! It is luring you for a purpose! Stupid, arrogant, dumb, foolish, blind. The System will send fay! We will be hunted, killed, spawned, killed.

The entity moved. Or rather, it didn't move at all. Instead, it pulled at the world as if space were a carpet, and Adam was a bug stuck to the material. "Offspring killed, denied plan, denied so much. Severed, tethered to this world. Tether cultivated across years, years, time, effort, bargain."

"That is your fault," the thing within Uva spat. "Your foolishness, your arrogance. Back, back!"

From the rising pillar of brightness emerged another entity. This one resembled a mess of feathered serpents all coiling around each other. Its appearance reminded Adam of a monster he saw in one of his classes—the orochi. They were of a hue Adam couldn't even name, and the color constantly changed. They didn't have so many eyes on them, but there were tongues that flaked and licked at the world, leaving scars in space. Adam's thoughts were empty. He moved on instinct alone.

He beat his wings harder and forward as he lurched closer and closer toward the Stranger. He was fast, but without Dimensionality, there was no way he could outpace the Stranger's tugs. Especially since it was dragging all of space and time toward it. Reality melted. The air tasted of cold glass mixed in mint and piss. Adam lurched. He let out a ragged cry as he flared his wings so hard the skin ripped free from

his back. He kept straining. His wings snapped. The Stranger pulled, disregarding the Dreamtaker's warning. The serpentine amalgamation lashed across space. But the Stranger pulled again, and Adam was so close to its massive maw, to all the eyes and teeth and—

Something exploded inside Adam Arrow.

Wings of the Starhawk 100 > 101 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Wings of the Starhawk (Adept) > Vectors of the Eternal Ascent (Heroic)

Vectors of the Eternal Ascent > 101

His wings exploded. The fiery plumage of the Starhawk faded as six solid, white-hot geometric shapes shone free from the fading flame. They resembled inverted pyramids, and they hovered in threes to Adam's left and right. And as he commanded himself to move, he exploded into motion, shooting free from the Stranger's grasp and zipping across the land. Friction and air peeled around his wings. His flight was utterly silent, without noise or any kind of strain. In fact, he felt lighter than light. This flight was effortless, and he hit his maximum speed as soon as he beat his wings. There was also the detail of how he flew without propulsion.

"NO!" the Stranger cried out. "SYSTEM! DID THIS JUST TO TAUNT ME! TO FORCE HIS EVOLUTION! WILL TAKE HIM! TAKE HIM! SPITE YOU!"

It reached out to snatch Adam with its many hands. Its eyes flared with colorful brightness, and Adam twisted left hard, preparing to brace against the brutal g-forces. G-forces that never came. The Gate Lord blinked. His wings were absolutely quiet, emitted no force, and carried him across kilometers of

space in a half-second. The world slowed around him, and even as he reached out, he felt no friction. In fact, it felt like the horizon was zooming to greet him of its own accord.

He continued firing his arrows, and another of his skills drew closer to the brink.

Bowslinger 99 > 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

He slipped between the massive gaps in the Dreamtaker's body, doing his best not to look at the glowing brightness. Unlike with the Stranger, the Dreamtaker didn't try to attack him. The many-feathered serpents widened themselves, allowing him to pass. He prepared to decelerate as he approached Uva—only to stop immediately without strain at all.

Adam blinked at his new wings in awe and disbelief. "What the hells did I just get?"

Then, another notification appeared before him.

Feat slot unlocked!

Feats [0/1]:

None

Lord Scorn is throwing a tantrum.

Lord Scorn is calling whoever detonated the Animancy Core in his realm a series of slurs.

Lord Scorn requests that the System convey that the attacker is going to be sodomized by the largest, sharpest piece of obsidian he can find in his dimension.

Two Heroic-Tier Skills got him a Feat slot. Adam's astonishment grew—and his disgust did immediately after. The System. It weakened the veil deliberately to provoke this final jump—all just for this. It wasn't trying to just torture him—it was torturing him with even more conflict to make him grow stronger—to push him over that final threshold.

As he looked upon Uva, he saw that her body was utterly flaccid. She bounced and shook in the air, more like a flag than a person.

Outside, a clash of colors shook Gate Theborn as the Dreamtaker and Stranger launched nonsense sentences at each other.

"Uva," Adam said, reaching out to grasp the Umbral. She spooled over his hands bonelessly. Light continued to spill forth from her eyes. Just looking at the light for too long made Adam's vision go double.

Removing mana boundary to semi-Integrated dimensions.

“What? Fucking why?” Adam cried. The surrounding eldritch colors grew brighter. The orochi-like body of the Dreamtaker slithered and shook as it was dragged across reality by the Stranger. Between the gaps of the many feathered serpents, he saw a wall of reaching hands lined with eyes curving around the outside. He saw the fabric of this reality break away, and he shifted his gaze back to Uva just as his sanity trembled.

Then, he remembered something. In his raw terror, he forgot that he was Gate Lord. He reached out to the mana core. He barely had time to examine its skills, but he knew one thing he could do. He willed it to channel the fullness of its cryomancy, and a beam of frost crashed down on the stranger.

But rather than doing any harm, the Stranger—or perhaps another one of its offspring—simply directed a few of its eyes upward, and a roiling spray of ethereal colors split through the stream of Cryomancy. The stranger's colors splashed into the mana core, and Adam cried out. He felt something pour into his very soul. He was synchronized to the core, and now the entity was striking him through it. It immediately filled with such discordant colors. His white-hot vectors began to flood with darkness, fill with eyes, and something gripped Gate Lord Adam Arrow from within his very soul.

Vectors of the Eternal Ascent > DID YOU THINK YOU COULD FLEE FROM ME ARROW-VERMIN-VESSEL-MURDERER?

“Oh, for fuc—” Adam’s words turned into a howl of anguish as Stranger started pouring its essence into him.

Chapter 92 (I) Radiant

I suspect that the System is an extremely intelligent entity, capable of weaving and connecting patterns so fine and so great that most can't even see the stitches. Indeed, divination might be just the art of interpreting these patterns, which is why even esteemed Diviners make mistakes or find it hard to parse some things.

After all, we are not designed to see the grand scope. Despite how much capacity towards change and destruction even the most powerful Pathbearers on Integrated Earth possess, they do not truly reach beyond the confines of the planet, and the System spends worlds within its Integration like someone might spend mithril.

Despite it being intelligent, I don't think the System is truly conscious. I think it has a set design, a desire for evolution, for everything to keep growing stronger and stronger.

But it does not recognize itself or us. It does not interact with us on a social basis or have a specific character or personality. It simply wishes to connect different events to different people to concoct the most severe, most strife-inducing scenarios possible. This does not mean that the outcome will always occur. That is also partially dependent on the individual. Many System-favored end up dead at a young age. I suspect that is the natural state of things.

After all, to become System-favored, you have to experience conflicts (usually of the physical variety) with high intensity and high frequency. More than this, you must prevail, survive, and adapt over and over again.

Once this becomes a common pattern in your life, the System might seek to expand it and connect your common patterns and propensity towards conflict with something else, with another entity's decision, with something else they might do to you, to the world, or to someone you care about.

Strife shapes the soul. Events, more than strife, even, shape the world. After all, our power originates within our deeds, our legends, the feats we perform, and this world and the mana cores grow because of the things that happen on it. Our conflict is nutrition for the System. We feed it, and it shapes us so that we can feed it more, so that we can indulge its palate. A never-ending cycle.

I have been rambling. My mind is drifting again. There's so much I try to keep track of. Even after all I've achieved, all I've become, I still can't grasp the fullness of the System's design. And if I can't grasp it, then how can I ever usurp it?

More experimentation is required.

-Udraal Thann's Animancy Notes

Adam howled. Foul colors exploded out from inside him. Black sludge poured out from his vector wings and seized him tight. Eyes opened in the tightening darkness—eyes that fed from misery. The Dreamtaker coiled in tight, crashing against the darkness, but the Stranger had Adam in a brutal grip. The Gate Lord screamed as his body began to snap and shift. It was changing him, reshaping him from the inside.

The Dreamtaker cried out. He glimpsed Uva shuddering beside him, and Adam tried to free himself—but everything was coming apart. His mind was rebelling against him.

Bowslinger > MINE NOW! MINE TOMORROW! MINE BEFORE! MINE AFTER!

Tears trailed down Adam's face. He was weeping in despair, in frustration, in rage at the unfairness of it all. He won. He and the others prevailed against the enemy. So why were they being punished so brutally? Were they just supposed to die? Were they just supposed to succumb to an impossible fight? Did the System just want them to be broken and used as flesh-coats for monsters that belong in the deepest recesses of his nightmares?

Mark of the Seeking Clairvoyant > WILL SUFFER FOR RUINING MY PLAN-BIRTHING-IMPREGNATION

The Dreamtaker—or something related to it—crashed harder against the Stranger. “AWAY! Away, Stranger! You are blind-deaf-foolish. Something is coming! You will suffer for this! Release him! Depart!

The Stranger just laughed.

Seer of Horizons > WILL SUFFER FOR TAKING MY OFFSPRING. BREAK-BURN-ETERNAL-TORTURE. SEARED INTO MANA. FLAYED INTO THE SYSTEM. NEVER DIE. ALWAYS SUFFER. IS SUFFERING. ALWAYS. FOREVER. FUTURE AND PAST.

Gate Lord Arrow gasped. The Recollector wasn’t dead? That’s why it was still screaming earlier? Always screaming. Gods... What the hells even is Animancy...

Veilpiercer > WILL BREAK YOU SLOWLY. WILL WEAR YOU. WILL WEAR THE UNBREAKING ONE. WILL WEAR THE SEEKER BESIDE YOU.

And that was Adam’s limit. He could barely take the hopelessness of losing himself and his soul to this wretched thing. But Shiv and Uva—his mind was breaking, but he wouldn’t fail them. He wouldn’t.

The Gate Lord reached inside him with his Hydromancy. It was a skill the Stranger hadn’t infested yet. He tore at the very water in his body, preparing to kill himself. Adam was terrified. A sob escaped him. He didn’t want to die. He didn’t want to perish like this. Blackedge needed him. His father needed him. Isabella—there was so much left to do. So much, yet the System was forcing his hand. And Shiv and Uva...

If they survived, they would...

He wanted to hope they would continue without him, that they would be fine without him. But a selfish portion of Adam Arrow didn't want them to be. He wanted them to mourn him. He wanted them to weep for him. He wanted them to depend on him.

And here he was, hesitating.

Adam Arrow was a selfish coward.

No, a warm voice whispered just beside him, interrupting his thoughts. You are, however, too savage to your own heart. Open your eyes, Archer. Open your eyes, and see the coming of the light!

And then, as the Outside threatened to consume Gate Theborn entirely, a dawn descended.

The Dreamtaker's body dissolved into splotches of wild color with a melodic noise. "System... Planned this. Stranger. Fool-blind-suffer."

A pillar of light continued pouring out from Uva. But from within, a gap opened where Adam was, exposing him to the roiling madness that threatened to consume the gate—his gate. But within that chaos, a radiant presence tore through the swirling tides of discord, exploding into existence with an incomparable glare.

Attention: The Starhawk has entered the dimension of Gate Theborn.

The Outside burned. The voice of a raging star shook existence itself. "Outsiders, begone. You have intruded where you do not belong. You have reached beyond your veil, and you have touched one you hold no claim to! Begone, or face the trueness of my Path. I grant you now a mercy you show no others. Take it. Or suffer the consequences."

The Stranger froze within Adam. It spat a single word before it resumed its twisting and tearing within his soul. "Starhawk. False-god. False-Ascension. Thief of dead stories. Alone against those you chose, your kin-blood-fellows. You are hunted. Come here now? Foolish. Should save power for what is to come."

"Such is what I am doing," the Starhawk declared. "It is why Adam Arrow is to live. The System weakened the boundaries to your domain as a lure. And the Pathbearer you seek to bend to your will is but a poison pill you have swallowed."

"Will still be my pill. Mine. FOREVER! ALWAYS!"

The Starhawk laughed, a melodious but booming noise that tugged at Adam's heart. The coming radiance faded slightly. Adam caught sight of a thousand celestial wings, all of them glistening as if impossibly sharp geometric fractals. And then at the center of those wings was the shape of a man who bore armor shaped from starlight. He had four arms and two heads: one of a hawk's, the other helmed, bearing the visage of a warrior. His upper two arms drew back a colossal greatbow, and an arrow forged from the cosmic power of the constellations began to shine. Below, his other hands clutched a massive halberd, something dense, something pitch black, darker than the void itself.

"I will not repeat myself, Stranger. You are not meant to be here. Cease, retreat to where you belong."

"Mine now, mine!" the Stranger screamed. It yelled from the rupture from where it bled over into reality. It yelled out from inside Adam. It yelled out using Adam.

"Blind to the end," the Starhawk said. "You have breached the world so cruelly and casually when the System gave you a chance. But you have forgotten something in your anger. We are Outside. In the twilight of the System's reach. And as such, the Mana Stability Threshold no longer applies. And even if it did, I care little what happens to your realm."

The Stranger went still.

"Ah, you didn't think that far. For all your strangeness, you have the temper and foresight of a child," the Starhawk said, a hint of humor at the end of his words. And then he fired his arrow. But the arrow didn't strike the Stranger. No, it tore across existence and slammed into Adam instead. The Gate Lord felt himself detonate, felt his soul come aflame. Adam choked as the divine arrow of a god pierced him, struck into him, struck at the very contamination bleeding over his soul.

The Stranger shrieked. The arrow split ever deeper, descending into the depths of Adam's being. And new, true colors exploded out from the Young Lord and replaced the eldritch maelstrom of the Outside. They were colors he knew; the pure white of the sun's stark glow, the rosy-orange tint of dawn and dusk, the azure blue of a clear sky, and the black of deepest midnight. It was all these colors at the same time, and it was none of them.

"Mine!" the Stranger screamed.

"Leave!" the Starhawk intoned, calm but powerful.

Between them, Adam shuddered. He thought he would break. Then he saw Uva falling through the air as the Dreamtaker fully retracted its colors into her, and he remembered Shiv lying there, bleeding. If Adam fell, who was going to look after them? Who was going to protect his team?

"No," Adam growled. It didn't matter if he was mad. It didn't matter if gods were fighting over his soul. He was a Pathbearer. He had a town to save, and he had companions to protect, to spare from the black hand of death.

"Out!" Adam shouted. He directed his strained Dimensionality inward, trying to reach the very plague consuming him, contaminating his skills, and affecting him. "Leave!" His Dimensionality couldn't sustain anymore. A surge of pain washed through him, so he switched to something else.

He prepared to use Necromancy on himself. He would break his own soul before he let the Stranger have it.

And that was just what the Starhawk had been waiting for. The celestial arrow detonated. The skills the Stranger infested were knocked loose. They rippled as strange, incomprehensible patterns, trembling free from Adam's body. He struck them with his Necromancy—with his vambrace, willing to destroy himself if it meant spiting the Stranger. But as his corrosive power struck, the world around him flashed with the withering brightness of Necromancy.

And that was how Adam Arrow discovered that the Stranger was more dimension than entity.

It howled. It screamed. Its soul was immense, and the damage he inflicted was feeble. Only the slightest corrosive marks spread through the world, but it was enough to stun the eldritch dimension that was burrowing through Gate Theborn.

And it was long enough for the Starhawk to casually fire another arrow.

A radiant wound sheared through the Stranger's expanse. The realm bled. Everything the Starhawk's arrow touched burned and blistered. The arrow winked out of sight, and then came a glittering flash, and a constellation Adam had never seen before bloomed into existence. Stars and raging fire formed a cracking outline within the Stranger.

"TAKE HIM BACK! ENOUGH! STOP! BURN-PAIN-BREAK! ENNOOUGH!"

Instead, the Starhawk fired his third arrow. Instead of a shaft, it was shaped from a chain of blinding stars, mere seconds before a supernova. The Stranger fled in naked panic, and the colors from the Outside fled with the entity. It was like watching an archer beat an ocean. It was like watching a man push back the horizon. As the arrows seared the Stranger, parts of it broke off and passed over into Adam just before it retracted its essence from his soul. He felt two fragments slip into him. Both filled his soul with ponderous weight.

As the Outside receded back into the crack from which the Stranger spawned, Gate Theborn returned before Adam's eyes.

"Never forgive you! We'll always, always remember this! Never! Never! Never! WILL COME FOR YOU AGAIN, ARCHER ADAM! TASTED YOUR PATH! KNOW YOUR FATE! KNOW THE PATHS WHERE CAUSALITY MIGHT LEAD YOU! WILL FIND YOU! WILL CLAIM YOU AND ALL!"

And with a final howl of outrage, the Stranger slipped back through the cracks, and the System sealed the Outside away again.

The boundaries to the semi-Integrated dimensions have been reinforced.

Adam fell. But before he could strike the ground, he triggered his wings again. Six inverted pyramids flared into existence beside Adam. He stilled in the air without any drop. There, he remained as if standing on solid ground, gawking at his Ascendant, his father's patron god.

"I... Starhawk," Adam wheezed. "But..."

"I am not the Starhawk," the divine being declared with a chuckle. "I am merely..." And then the "Starhawk" dissolved into a series of constellations, drifting through the air like fireflies. "...an arrow fired at an opportune moment. My attention is consumed. I am assailed from all sides—hunted by my own. All this is true, as the intruder said. And I cannot unleash my power upon Integrated Earth without grave consequences. Much of what you might have discovered about me is true. I will not lie. But there are pieces you are missing. Pieces of the story that have been misrepresented."

Adam's mouth opened and closed. His mind was reeling. He didn't know how to react.

"Thankfully, I can still fire into the Outside without cost. For the System cares little about that which its mana has not yet infected."

Infected? Adam thought.

Then, two pulses of power stirred inside him. A heat began to swell.

The Starhawk continued. "Your father struggles hard, Young Arrow. He needs your aid, and soon. Even with my Blessing, even his immense and miraculous power, the divinity vested through my perch, the encirclement of Blackedge strains him. Vicar Sullain is a terrible adversary to have—great enough even to harm something like me, if I am careless. And worse than that, he is set to receive major reinforcement from the Republic itself, though the Inquisition operates against Blackedge for entirely different reasons."

A sigh came from the Starhawk's fired arrow. "Grave times are upon us. Multiple wars and grand struggles loom on the horizon. But I am spent as I am. Reach Blackedge. Find your father. Ascend Starhawk's Perch with whatever force you can muster, with whatever allies you can bring. I see the great flame around you, favored of the System. You have my sympathy, Adam. And my pride. Defy. Fight. Continue." The Constellations began to dim. "The System has allowed me my presence for only so long. Even this fragment, even this diminutive part of me, cannot linger here, lest I cause a mana storm of horrific proportions."

The Starhawk's arrow pointed up, staring at the mana core of Gate Theborn. "Ah, and the System's hand... subtle and vulgar at the same time. I realized the other things it desired to bear fruit, but not this."

Chapter 92 (II) Radiant

Slowly, Adam's eyes widened as he turned to regard the core. Its color had changed entirely. Rather than a consistent grey, it was a shifting aurora. Mana spilled out from it, dissolving into the gate. Yet, it was of a strange color, a color that Adam couldn't ever recall seeing. It resembled a particularly dark shade of purple. But then, as it changed once more, something happened. The purple began to crack. The mana core reconnected with Adam, and slowly, it started taking inspiration from his being. Because, as the gate had once been pierced by the Stranger, he could feel its influence bleeding over into him, and his history bleeding over into the core in turn.

It began to shine, a blinding radiance unlike anything Adam had ever seen in a mana core. It was azure blue mixed with the corona of a rising dawn. It was the color of Adam's eyes.

"What? What is happening?" Adam said.

"The core will undergo decay due to the damage suffered by this gate," the Starhawk explained.

"However, its nature has been changed. It has undergone a unique incident: something that has never before happened in its known history or yours. This core is now a Unique Core."

Adam stared on in awe. "Cores can be Unique?"

The Starhawk looked down upon Adam. He had a feeling that the god's human head was smiling under his helmet. "Indeed. Just like how you can gain a Unique Skill if you survive an impossible experience, perform a truly novel feat, or perhaps get nudged in, you will see yourself shaped by the System's hand."

"The System," Adam wheezed. He didn't fully understand.

"Indeed. It made sure that the Stranger could escape me. And it deliberately weakened the boundaries between dimensions to allow its entrance to begin with."

"Why?" Adam whispered. "All for strife?"

"Because there was an opportunity for evolution. Because it desires constant, eternal evolution, and nothing inspires change more than desperate conflict. Usually, the System can casually hold the great eldritch entities at bay. The greater the Outsider, the stronger their allergy to mana. But it allowed its resistance here to thin just long enough for the Stranger to breach the core and to affect you. And then it called to me. It sent me and several other gods a Quest to save you. I responded. And the Stranger was the one that paid."

And then, a list of notifications loaded before Adam as he doubled over. Something was igniting inside him. The fragments left in him by the Stranger were merging with his soul, becoming skills, mixing with his mana. He could feel the change, and it hurt.

Adam's jaw clenched, and he struggled to stay upright. "Godsdamn the System," he muttered under his breath. "There's no time to rest. Not even a single moment of mercy..." His voice trailed off to an exhausted whimper, and the Starhawk let out a sigh of pity.

"I fear I understand you more than most, more than you can possibly think. But take heart and stand now. Ascend!" The Starhawk smashed a fist against his star-forged cuirass, and a sound like a great bell chiming rang out. "Soar! Defy! Righteous blood flows in your veins, Young Arrow! And a noble architecture has become your character. This world will seek to break you down. The System cares nothing for goodness, for the righteousness that men do. But I do. We do, Young Arrow! Because even should strife fall upon us, even should the heavens be unkind, we do not need to be. Strength is beyond cruelty. Strength is above it. Strive for strength. Be yourself in defiance of the world. It seeks to lay you low. Prevail regardless. We shall speak again soon. My true self awaits you... at Blackedge."

The deity's projection disappeared in a flash of brilliance, and Adam sucked in a sharp breath of air. His insides felt like they were on fire, but rather than burning, he felt parts of his soul get reforged. He felt a new power flood out from his being. Suddenly, a brilliant azure sun pulsed out behind Adam, flaring over his head like a crown and brightening the world around him. He felt the sun. It was bound to him. It was a part of him, an extension of his very soul, forged from a broken piece of the Stranger that had been purified by the Starhawk's arrow. A fragment of eldritch power blunted by divinity melded with Adam, and it changed him just as it changed within him, acclimating itself to his legend, his very soul.

Skill Gained: The Righteous Dawn Prevails 1 (Unique)

The other fragment continued to merge.

The azure sun's light wasn't just a thing of heat and brightness. There was a power to it, a power that extended beyond a mere lore of magic. There was something divine ingrained in it still, and that divinity allowed him to spot Uva laying somewhere just below him.

The light glinted against her shield, and it hovered over her, expanding wide into a dense layer of floating fragments. Adam could see the Dynamancy Core showing, and underneath it, Uva was utterly flat. Her body extended across ten full meters of space. More than flat, she was practically like a rope in some ways. Her fingers extended like cords, and they were still spooling outward. And she was writhing, whimpering. He'd never heard that from her before. Well, aside from when she overstrained her mana.

Adam landed beside her, and just then she drew a sharp intake of breath. She blinked, and she looked up. She then took on a nature of awe and wonder as Adam Arrow descended. "Uva," he said, "are you all right?" He examined her and tried to find any wounds on her body. Parts of her shield were badly dented, but aside from that...

"My mind is wounded." She tried to reach up to clutch at her head, but parts of her shoulder wiggled like someone swinging a rope. More of her unspooled. "I think... I would like to lie here for a while," Uva whimpered. "I think something tore parts of my..." She stopped talking and grimaced. The remaining pieces of her shattered armor barely clung to her. She was going to need a replacement.

Adam gathered her up into his arms, and she still drooped around him, but slowly she began to tighten, turning like a cord. He didn't feel her presence like a snake coiling around his body, but rather like she was just leaning against him. She still weighed the same. It was just that, as he examined her, it was like she was moving oddly, moving in directions and across spaces he couldn't...

He shook his head. Both Uva and Shiv came out of Gate Theborn's capture utterly transformed. He was the only one still standing, and even then, it took a direct intervention on the part of his patron god to do so, a situation engineered by the System to enhance his power as well, to save him.

It is empowering me for Blackedge. It wants me to fight. It wants more struggle. If I'd died just now, then the Stranger would have gained something. And Uva and Shiv... If they managed to escape, they would have never let it go. But then, if it had taken over all of us, we would have been used against the world anyway. There is no way the System can lose. But it can make greater gains in one circumstance over another.

"Adam," Uva muttered.

"Yes?" Adam said.

"Why are you... Why are you glowing?" She noticed the sun hovering behind him. "Why do you have an azure sun drifting behind you?"

"The System," Adam sneered.

"The System?" Uva said.

"I got claimed by the Stranger," Adam explained. "But it was a trap by the System. An opening for the Starhawk. And now I have a Unique Skill."

And just then, his other skill loaded.

Well, not exactly a skill.

Feat Gained: Smite the Wicked (Unique) - Allows the Pathbearer to infuse one of their attacks with absolute lethality after they slay a hundred beings who have committed the vilest of deeds.

"And a Unique Feat," he muttered.

She laughed. "I think I... there are notifications... Hm." Uva swallowed. "The light of your sun... It is making my skills... It makes me feel better..."

Adam blinked. "What?"

Suddenly, Uva sobered. Her eldritch eyes glowed brighter. "Yes, my skills are growing. The levels are increasing... Your sun is making me stronger." Adam paused, and then he felt at the dawn following him, at the triumph of righteous light. Adam tried directing his sun's brightness, and he managed to channel a beam directly into Uva. He focused its brilliance, straining his very soul to guide the star's glare.

Uva gasped. She gasped as her Psychomancy mana threads exploded, more threads shearing out from her. She went from being a spiderweb to a literal jungle of Psychomancy, and then more threads sheared back inside of her. She began to pull at the parts of her own mind, sliding pieces back together, fixing things, stitching things.

"Keep—keep going," she breathed. She immediately reformed back to her three-dimensional self, and a look of utter exhilaration washed through her. It was more open emotion than he had seen in Uva's face than ever before. "Keep going." She laughed. "It feels... It feels incredible."

Adam tried to pour more, but he groaned. The sun strained him immensely. It was a stressful power to wield when he focused it, when he made it flare, but it was a power that enhanced everyone around him. What happens if I run into an enemy? Adam thought. Would it enhance them too?

Intuition told him otherwise.

Thanks to his vector wings, he arrived back at the Surface Gateway in mere seconds. His acceleration was weightless—reactionless. Through it all, neither he nor Uva even felt the slightest hint of turbulence.

As they landed in the middle of the plaza, he found two mercenaries tending to Shiv. The Deathless hadn't died, but his condition looked worse than before. He was pale. He was spent. His eyes were blinking rapidly. Adam could tell he was on the verge of unconsciousness. He was on the verge until Adam's light fell upon him as well.

Shiv gasped. His Biomancy exploded out from him. Several nearby Pathbearers also had an obvious response. Some of them grew larger, their muscles swelling. Others became faster. Many felt their magic explode out from their body, growing more potent in a matter of moments. People stared at Adam. So many people. And their eyes were locked on dawn hovering just over his head.

But not everyone was so blessed by his presence, for some among the masses burned. They cried out, their bodies coming afire beneath Adam's azure dawn. Their flesh did not melt, their skin did not blacken, but their soul simmered where their material bodies did not. Adam felt them wither, felt their bodies weaken, felt their strength lessen, felt their magic shrink back into them. More than a few were Jump Mages. Their Portomancy shriveled practically back into their bodies. Some gasped and collapsed entirely. Entire groups of mercenaries suffered an adverse reaction just at his very coming.

And as they burned, Adam felt his Feat trigger for the first time, flashes of their ill deeds blasted into his mind. He gained near premonitions of the vile acts committed by the people around him, premonitions and an urge to strike them down, to feed the wrath lurking inside him—unleash his first smite.

He clenched his jaw but barely held himself back. He wouldn't kill them, not yet, not without a tribunal. If he slaughtered them now in front of so many, it would be misconstrued. And he would not lose his newly obtained lordship because he was hasty, because he was hateful and rageful.

But this power... He was starting to understand what this power granted. It let him know who committed an act of evil. It let him know, and it fed him. It fed him with a building power as he struck and burned at the very spirits of the vile.

Suddenly, Shiv shot upright. His wounds were still severe, but the massive gash on his chest was ever so slowly beginning to close. And to Adam's astonishment, some of his Necromancy burns flaked away as well.

"What the hell?" Shiv breathed. "What the hell did you just—" And he noticed. He noticed the burns flaking away from his hand, the first growth of new and healthy skin revealed underneath. His eyes widened.

Adam reduced the flare he was sending at Uva, and she let out a gasp. "More. More—" She grabbed at him, and then she blinked as if just realizing what she'd said. "Sorry, it was intoxicating."

"I know," Adam said. "I could feel... I could feel how you all flourished in my light... Or burned..."

And still, some people were writhing, fleeing from his light. Adam clenched his jaw. And then he channeled his azure sunlight directly into Shiv. He focused his power, and the Deathless flinched. An entire section of his soul wounds began to mend at a crawling pace—but still far faster than before.

Shiv laughed. "What the hells happened while I was down and out?" He looked at Adam's wings and blinked. Before he could speak, he noticed the mana core had changed colors as well. Adam hadn't even had bloody time to examine the core's status.

"System," Uva breathed, staring greedily at Adam's hovering sun.

"The Stranger tried to eat me. The System allowed the bloody bastard to get close. Then the Starhawk fired an arrow across realms, and now you're looking at a Unique-Tier Pathbearer."

"You?" Shiv said, narrowing his eyes sarcastically. "I don't know. You still look frail. Are you sure you evolved?" Adam narrowed his eyes and cut off the sunlight. Shiv doubled over, clutching his body. "Shit. Fuck. Okay. You're Unique. Please, great Pathbearer Adam, just turn the light back on."

And Adam did. And it felt good. And he grinned as Shiv let out a sigh.

“That’s... that’s all three of us.” Uva frowned. Just then, she made eye contact with Shiv, and his expression hardened.

“Your eyes,” Shiv rasped.

“A gateway to another place now,” Uva replied. “To the Outside. And... when I dove into the Recollector’s mind, I got something else as well. Another skill...”

“You did?” Adam said, surprised. “What is it?”

Uva looked uncomfortable. She eyed the many people staring at them. “Not here,” she said telepathically. “Best that I show both of you where there are fewer prying eyes. And where it won’t affect anyone else.”

“That bad?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know,” Uva admitted. A cold anxiety radiated from her. Uva didn’t much get scared, but after all the shit they went through...

“Wait, shit!” Shiv threw the bedsheets off himself. Uva did a double-take as she realized he wasn’t wearing anything. Siggy’s eyes bulged as her mouth fell open. “Can Hu. Valor. Adam. We need to go. We need to find them.”

The Young Lord realized why Shiv was so animated, and raw worry exploded inside him as well. “Shit. I think I saw a few teleportation anchors. They were damaged but intact. They should be fine. They should be.”

Shiv growled. “System, you piece of shit, do not fuck us now.”

Adam’s worry worsened. “Don’t do that.”

“Why?”

“It might send another eldritch entity or god after us.”

The Deathless glared. “Good. Let them come. I got plenty of fight left in me.”

The Gate Lord just stared at Shiv and cut off his sunlight again.

Shiv folded over, and Uva turned bowl-shaped and caught him before he collapsed.

“Right,” Shiv wheezed. “No provoking fate. At least for now.”

Chapter 93 (I) Reinforce

A soul being damaged is a colloquial way of describing the pain one feels when their skills are shattered, or when they suffer the effects of Necromancy.

The soul itself, after all, is more of a repository—a storage or archive for our own legends and history. It is these legends and histories, these feats of struggle and triumph and defeats, that shape our skills. And what are skills but expressions of who we are, who we strive to be, who we will become, should we continue walking our Paths?

Necromancy, then, is reaching that which is lost. It reaches into defeat. It reaches into the shadow of who we are, the parts where we are insufficient, the moments we fell—all that was and was lost, all that could have been and was never reached. That is why Necromancy is so destructive to the so-called soul: because it is a story breaker, a story defiler, something that withers potential itself.

And that is why all entities drawn back from the brink of death, called Risen, are more Fallen in actual fact. They are Fallen because they are at their lowest potential. They are a shadow of who they were, who they could be, and they are the echoes of their darkest thoughts, their ruined memories, their destroyed history.

Fallen Legendary Pathbearers often plunge far beneath even Heroic-Tier after their destruction and pseudo-resurrection.

But then, I asked myself if one is capable of falling, if one can be broken so brutally, if a skill, a history, one's own conception of their personal mythology made manifest through the System's magic can be

deformed so drastically, then it should also be possible to remake a soul. To remake the components of a soul, to shape history without ever truly performing a requisite deed in the eyes of the System.

And thus, we depart from Necromancy—the shadow of what was, the ease of breaking—and we enter Animancy, which, if I am correct in my assumptions, is the magic of magic itself.

More experimentation is required.

-Udraal Thann's Animancy Notes

Before Shiv even spiked his gravitic field once, Adam surged right past him. There was no warning, no hint, or anything that could have prepared the Deathless for just how quickly the Gate Lord reached top speed. Shiv realized immediately that Adam had undergone a major Skill Evolution. Rather than having the fiery Wings of the Starhawk, he now had six inverted pyramids, white-hot and pulsing bright with strange energy.

The wings gave off no force at all. There were no ripples in the air, no shock waves; there wasn't even any sound. It was like Adam was traveling without propulsion. And after a few seconds more, Shiv was certain the Young Lord was

moving without propulsion. He was simply accelerating of his own accord, divorced from the world. Shiv wasn't a well-versed student of physics, but even he knew that every action should have a reaction. Well, there was no reaction for Adam, not anymore.

There was also no build-up to him reaching max velocity. One moment, Adam was still; the next, he was shooting ahead and accelerating at a constant, staggering pace. Shiv felt his jaw drop momentarily. This, he didn't see coming at all. And as Uva cast herself into his mind, she tasted his surprise as well.

But the surprise didn't last. A sudden, aberrant feeling of competitiveness overcame Shiv, and he spiked his field again and again, chasing after the new Gate Lord. Uva kept them all connected, but her Reflexes Skill was drastically inferior to both of theirs now. She barely managed a thought while both of them spoke to each other.

"That's a nice Skill Evolution to have there," Shiv said.

"I got it when the bloody Stranger tried to drag me into its mouth." Adam spat back a shudder.

Shiv's amusement died down. He realized just how much Adam was holding within himself. How much stress, how much terror, how much anguish. Fighting the eldritch entity took a lot out of Adam Arrow, and it was a miracle he was still keeping it together. Such was why Shiv resolved to take Adam's mind off things with a brief, albeit interesting, race.

For a bit, he considered using his Strider of the Unbending Path to instantly reappear right next to Adam and shock the Dimensional Archer. He guessed it was probably four kilometers of distance. Adam was turning into a smaller and smaller dot on the horizon, but between Inertial Overdrive and stopping time, Shiv dismissed that thought. He wasn't going to be cheap. He didn't have it in him to be cheap; Adam deserved better than that. Besides, Shiv wanted to see if he could actually catch up to Adam using his own Heroic-Tier Skill Evolution. There was a reason why he had Inertial Overdrive, after all.

So far, it seemed Adam's skill was outright superior, but if there was one thing Shiv learned through all his trials and triumphs, it was that there was always more than meets the eye for every skill one gained. There were always advantages, limitations, and prices to pay, and he intended to discover Adam's, along with his own.

Shiv spiked his field a dozen times in quick succession. His speed exploded. The world around him turned into a traveling ball of flame. The Young Lord briefly stopped. Shiv saw Adam turn around, shifting in place while his wings remained unmoving. The pointed ends of each of his vectors determined his position of acceleration. That was another advantage Adam had; he seemed to be able to move his body freely, independent of his wings, meaning he could be going in one direction and not even need to twist his body around entirely to shoot. The wings could reorient him, and he made instant and extreme turns and flight adjustments without suffering any drag either.

Truly, Adam was a frictionless flyer. Reactionless, Shiv thought again. But the difference in their Heroic-Tier skills quickly revealed itself. Where once Adam seemed impossibly fast, the growing gulf between them began to slow, stop, and then shrink. Slowly, Shiv was moving faster. Adam drew closer with every spike Shiv applied to himself. His gravitic field pulled him along, and every single surge of momentum he gained was retained all throughout his journey, and with the frequency of his gravity spikes, his speed soon grew to be exponential.

At first, he crawled closer to Adam, inching toward the Young Lord bit by bit. But with every subsequent pull on his field, his body groaned and suffered. Wounds opened up, his recently mended gash lining his chest bled freely, his soul burns coating the left side of his body screamed at him, but Shiv was too excited and too motivated to stop. His mind skipped briefly as he forgot why he was doing this, but the pain brought him back. His parts within his body were destroyed from the sheer force of Inertial Overdrive. His acceleration drastically outpaced Adam's. He shot forward like a plunging anvil, while Adam went from an arrow in flight to a feather held still by a rushing gale.

Despite this, Shiv realized that Adam was ridiculously fast. Absurdly, compared to most people. It was just that he seemed to have a maximum ceiling to his speed, one that might increase with future Skill Evolutions and levels gained. But the velocity at which he traveled couldn't stack, and that was where Shiv beat him. The Young Lord flew wide, rising high into the air to avoid the massive tsunami of force that followed Shiv in his wake. A surging fist of flame smashed over the ruins of Gate Theborn. Below, the rubble began to melt, and as the force of his dragging acceleration crashed over them, they dissolved to nothing but ash and motes of dust.

"What in the bloody hells was that?" Adam cried.

Shiv could only laugh—laugh as he coughed blood, as his eyes burst, as his vision began to fade. Uva was starting to mutter something inside his mind, doubtlessly calling for him to stop. Or to control his speed. But for a while, just a while, he wanted to go this fast. He wanted to see the difference between them. He couldn't help it.

He was born to fight. He was born to face down titans. And he was born to compete with Adam Arrow.

But as Shiv continued on, he realized another major advantage Adam had over him. Reactionless. The word repeated in Shiv's mind over and over as he realized Adam was easily capable of halting in place, going from traveling kilometers every second to becoming impossibly still, without any ill effect to his body.

Shiv, meanwhile, was practically being eroded down to his bone. He gritted his teeth and pointed downward, but even the attempt to wrestle the vector of his acceleration proved to be a grand struggle. He was going too fast, far too fast for his gravity field to even contend with, and frankly, his gravity field was the problem. Once he picked the direction that he was going in, the best he could do was make a few small angles of adjustment after extreme speed was achieved.

Inertial Overdrive was really defined by "overdrive." Eventually, he would get to a point where his strength wasn't enough, where his body was just fragile glass rather than adaptive adamantium.

Right, Shiv thought, that's enough of that. And then he froze time.

His temporal shell flared over him, and he projected his Chronomancy back a full ten seconds, practically halfway across the entire gate. He blinked in place, and his armor shuddered just a little. Shiv grinned once more. His Strider of the Unbending Path could arguably be the greater reward of his recent struggles, even as just a Master-Tier skill. Inertial Overdrive might have been Heroic, but some skills simply offered an absolute advantage instead of a relative one.

Suddenly Shiv was slower, his body wasn't so damaged, and he detonated his inertial sheath with a thought. The blast wave was still intense; the fireball cleaved out, and he flattened it into the form of an envelope. As he struck his hands together, creating a counter-shock wave against the displaced force rushing up behind him, it flattened and cleaved downward, spearing a full kilometer deep into the already ruined earth. A glistening lip of glass and melted obsidian shone from far below. For a moment, it seemed that one of Gate Theborn's molten rivers had returned, but ultimately, the gleam faded as the heat dissipated.

A second later, Shiv forgot what he just did again, why he gained a Gravitic Wrestler level.

Gravitic Wrestler 140 > 141

Finally, Uva responded, finishing her thought. "Shiv, what just... It felt like I lost an entire section of my time. Did you freeze time? Did you use your Chronomancy again?" She sounded annoyed, but also fascinated, and slightly excited.

"Yeah," Shiv said. His thoughts felt loose and hard to track. "I just had a little race with Adam."

Adam was still flinching, looking around, trying to find where the wall of force and flame coming right at him went. He stared at Shiv, and the Deathless laughed—laughed as the Young Lord hovered above, cursing at him. Shiv shook his head. He got a little carried away then, and then he noticed his own mind was still reeling. His own impulses were all over the place. His mood shot high, swooped low, and he groaned.

Shit... I'm still messed up... The brain damage inflicted on him was still lingering. He wasn't completely well, even after everything Uva did.

And to cement that understanding, she began to stitch away at him again. "Composer, I don't know how you're coherent right now," she breathed.

"I just... I..." And Shiv thought back to his torture, how the things clawed at his very skills, how the entities the Recollector poured into him tore his mind apart over and over again, deformed his body, mutated him as they tried to mold him into a desired vessel for their eldritch designs. He went insane several times then. He went insane, but eventually, he always came back...

Then, just then, a voice whispered from within, Rose's voice. Even I... Even I come back,

she muttered. A slight bit of coherence had returned to her. Previously, Shiv tuned out her constant screaming, her gibbering insanity. Even I am dragged back to full restoration. God's ascendance, what kind of nightmare am I trapped in?

Shiv ignored her dehumanizing remark. On some level, he got it, and on another, he was used to being treated as a thing by the people of Blackedge, and she was, more than anyone else, a citizen of Blackedge. Even if she'd been dead for over eighteen years.

"Did you forget that we're looking for Valor and Can Hu!" Adam cried, his frustration boiling to near anger, and Shiv suddenly realized that he was the one who jolted them into action a mere few seconds ago.

Right, Shiv thought, and then he noticed the glowing crevice beneath him again. When did that get made—

Uva pulled at his focus. Shiv shuddered.

"Just follow my voice and follow Adam," she spoke. "I will keep you focused. Parts of your attention will be drifting as I continue my mending. I moved your broken mind back together in haste. Some parts should not be together. You healed wrong. I need to tear at some of your mind. Be ready for a bit of... oddness."

"And what about... What about you?" Shiv asked. "What about your wounds?"

"My wounds, I can fix in time," she said dismissively, but he could still feel a cold dread lining the undercurrents of her consciousness. He knew her; they'd been intimate on a level deeper than most could imagine, and the chill that gnawed at her was of a different sort altogether than her normal, cool demeanor.

Shiv's attention jumped several times more, and twice Uva had to center him before he started another race with Adam, briefly forgetting where he was. But it took very little time for the Young Lord to spot where Valor, Can Hu, and the owl were left. Adam touched down over a dense mound of half-melted rubble. Shiv slammed deep into the earth, approximately 300 meters away from Adam to avoid any friendly fire. Debris still spiked everywhere, and the lightest discharge that followed was still devastating enough to leave a shallow crater on the pockmarked land.

From on high, the bottom of Gate Theborn looked like it had been pounded by siege spells and artillery for well over a month. That was how it seemed to Shiv, and that was the way Uva felt as well.

Shiv crossed the remaining distance without feeding his sheath any more force. Controlling it was still hard. It was a hungry layer of membrane. Practically every bit of kinetic energy he applied on himself

was drawn at least somewhat into the sheath. It wanted him to go fast. It wanted to explode. And it had an effect on his mood as well.

Shiv did his best to focus. It was hard with his broken mind. More than a few times, he had to pop himself. Then he lost track of his thoughts again and just started doing it for fun. And the last time, he popped himself right beside Adam, making the Young Lord stagger.

"Stop that!" Adam hissed, barely regaining his balance. "We need to get Can Hu and Valor out!"

Uva tugged on Shiv's mind again, and a brief, tranquil moment of absolute focus followed. Right, Can Hu, Valor. They remained cemented in his mind. And with that, a flood of other memories followed as well: Valor broken and unmoving, Can Hu unresponsive. Uva then had to seal away the part of him that was hurtling towards a berserker rage.

Godsdamned Recollector, Shiv thought. When I eventually get to the Stranger's dimension—and I will find my way there. If not tomorrow, then in a thousand years, a million years. I'm going to rip the entire dimension apart.

Adam pawed at the rubble, grunting as his Skybearer's Strength allowed him to pitch chunks of rubble three times the size of his body as if they were the size of his fist instead. Shiv sniffed and simply swept everything beneath him away with a casual swipe of a hand. Adam stepped back as a wave of force tore across the land. Shiv reached deeper, slamming his gravitic field over the mound, and he pulled. He dug down until he felt something that didn't crack as easily as stone or obsidian. That's how he separated the teleportation anchor from the rest of the debris. With a careful tug, he tore it out from the ground, and it exploded upward, sending obsidian, concrete, glass, and more flying everywhere.

Shiv's stomach dropped, and he felt it drop two more times as both Uva and Adam feared the worst. The incredibly sturdy teleportation anchor had crumpled into a small and deformed ball during the

combat of the last hour. Shiv gritted his teeth as Adam prepared to cast a Necromancy spell. He said that he wanted to shear away an edge to cut an opening so they could see within and carefully extract.

Shiv stopped listening then. Just enough anger leaked into his focus that he acted with casual, contemptuous ease. He tore the teleportation anchor open. His recent levels and his rage made the action easy. Ridiculously so. Compared to the Jealousy's teleportation anchor, the one they used as an operating base within Gate Theborn was also practically tiny.

As such, it was like opening an aluminum can.

Chapter 93 (II) Reinforce

The teleportation anchor split in half. Shiv threw away the topmost section, chucking it far without even a second thought. He let out a tense breath as he looked inside, preparing himself for the worst, but then he saw an opening. An opening that he remembered seeing several times over the course of the past few days. It looked like a portal within the teleportation anchor had been opened. Then he realized it wasn't a portal. It was a smaller dimension, a... Category 1 dimension. Right, Shiv remembered. Can Hu got a Master-Tier item from the Dragon-Knight Quest as well. The Garden of Bountiful Alloy.

A frame of metal became the archway holding a new portal, and it sat at the center of the crumpled teleportation anchor, surrounded by a cube of dense alloy to stop it from being crushed. Through the portal, Shiv saw two gleaming green eyes stare back at him. A smile curved on his face immediately.

"Can Hu!" Shiv cried, his heart accelerating, joy catching fire in his veins..

"Pathbearer Shiv," Can Hu replied, and he could hear relief and satisfaction in Can Hu's echoing tones as well.

Uva untangled herself from him, but left more than a few strands inside his mind as she continued mending him. Adam slipped past Shiv and squeezed into the mangled remains of the teleportation anchor. He sprinted into the small dimension of growing alloy, and his sun shone bright. The azure dawn splashed over Can Hu and over the scattered and still broken form of Valor.

Shiv's initial joy evaporated. Valor was still broken, unmoving. A hardened dread cemented inside Shiv. He couldn't imagine a world where Valor could die, yet the possibility gnawed at him. But even so, while Can Hu was standing, supported by a column of stone and several pieces of metal that held his body as if an armor stand, Valor lay unmoving on the ground, lifeless, soulless even.

Do not be dead, Valor. Do you hear me? Do you hear me, System? Shiv snarled internally.

Uva's connection comforted him, but it made no difference. If Valor died, if any of them had died during this battle, what the hells would he do? For the first time, Shiv felt himself deflated. His mood swung drastically, and a sudden onrush of crushing despair nearly flooded his mind, and then it broke away as his focus jumped.

"Sorry," Uva said. "It's just, the damage is..."

"You keep working," Shiv thought. "But thanks, Uva. Really. I wouldn't know what I'd be doing without you."

"Screaming incoherently, like a borderline vegetable, lost to a berserk rage," Uva surmised accurately with a slight hint of deadpan humor.

Shiv nodded. "Yeah, probably that." And then another memory returned to him unbidden. He remembered charging the entity, screaming how he was the chef and it was the food. Shiv cringed. Uva let out a slight huff of laughter, but it was diminished as Adam knelt down and checked on Valor.

"Pathbearer Adam," Can Hu said. Its voice echoed in imitation of an exhalation. "What is that?" Can Hu directed a small pebble towards Adam's azure sun. "I feel..." Can Hu moved. Its damaged body shifted, even with Shiv's cracked armor weighing on it. It let out a slow groan of pain, but it moved of its own accord.

Shiv's eyes widened, and Uva's mind went still.

"I am..." Can Hu gasped. "My skills, they are still broken, but my existing skills, the ones that are whole, their levels are climbing. They are..."

"Yeah," Shiv breathed. "Adam here had a run-in with the Stranger, and now..." His mind trailed off. He forgot what he was talking about. "I'll let you tell him later," Shiv said, suddenly feeling extremely mentally exhausted.

Then Adam's light faded from Shiv's body, faded from everyone but Valor. Shiv groaned as he clutched at his chest. The bleeding intensified immediately. The pain lining the left hemisphere of his entire person flared to a roaring height once more.

Uva groaned. The sheer damage sustained by her mind leaked over into Shiv's, and his thoughts began to skip rapidly as well. He only remembered the following moments in fractured instances, but he saw Adam channeling a spray of azure sunlight over the downed Legendary Pathbearer. For a few seconds, Valor was drowned in a resplendent blue glow. Shiv held his breath, and then he let it out multiple times because he kept forgetting where he was and who he was. It didn't help that the psionic backlash

inflicted a cascade and caused Uva to forget herself as well. She was constantly blinking. He rapidly veered towards berserk, and then she had to undo his anger before something happened.

But finally, Adam sagged forward, and Shiv shot into the minor dimension. He caught the Young Lord before he could fall, and Adam muttered a grateful "thanks." And beneath them, a glow returned to Valor's eyes. There was a flicker, but then it faded again. Shiv felt his stomach drop once more. Then a burst of sparks ignited, and Valor started twitching into motion. The other pieces of his body, the dagger and the arms, slid into place within his reforming ghostly visage.

Then Valor shot up, manifesting his Necromancy.

A corrosive blade slashed out just as Shiv's mind lost track of where he was. Adam tackled him as his vector wings flared. He moved Shiv out of the room, both of them gliding weightlessly, reactionlessly, avoiding Valor's strike by the distance of a meter.

"Come, let me show you how a—" And then Valor stopped talking. He finally noticed who he was looking at.

Adam regarded the Legendary Pathbearer. "Valor, are you well? Are you?"

Shiv, meanwhile, staggered over to Valor, uncaring about the Necromantic blade, and tried to hug the ghost. He forgot, momentarily, that Valor was currently imprinted by a shroud of Necromancy as well.

"No!" Adam screamed. He shot forward and pinned Shiv against the wall. His acceleration rattled them both. That's how Shiv discovered that force could still be enacted on Adam. His vectors of reactionless acceleration applied mainly to his movement, and not his body specifically. How that worked was

beyond Shiv's understanding. He would probably have to ask a Dynamancer. And, unfortunately, he forgot to make a note of that too, because his temporary amnesia skipped in once more.

Adam, meanwhile, walked closer to Valor, and the Legendary Pathbearer staggered back, hovering in the air though lethargically. His pieces shivered as if his spirit could barely sustain their weight. "We are alive. We have not been taken as thralls for the Outsiders," Valor noted, sounding somewhat awestruck. "I thought that would be our certain fate. I thought I would be made a personal vessel for the Stranger to use as a puppet to torment me and the rest of us for as long as it could sustain our souls."

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

He studied Adam, Shiv, and Uva for a moment. Then his eyes fell on Shiv. "Shiv, your clothes..."

"They got burned off," Shiv muttered. "I can't remember how." And then he remembered how. "Oh yeah, I was fighting that weird thing, and I developed a Heroic-Tier Reflexes Skill, and then I started moving really fast and the world became really hot and..." Shiv rambled on and then stopped as he forgot what he was talking about.

Adam took over talking to Valor instead. "A lot has happened. But what about you? Are you well?"

He kept his sun concentrated on the Legendary Pathbearer, and beneath Adam's azure glow, Valor let out a rasp of relief. "Slightly better now than I was. But the damage the Outsider did to my form, how could..." And then he regarded Adam's azure sun. "What is this? What have you gained?"

"The Righteous Dawn Prevails," Adam intoned. "I am a Unique Pathbearer now." He tried and failed to hide a grin.

Shiv looked at Adam. "You're a Unique Pathbearer?" He blinked. "When in the hells did that happen?"

Adam looked at Shiv and shook his head. "Shiv, you have amnesia. You'll remember in a moment."

"I will? Oh, oh, right."

"And Uva," Valor continued. Now he was regarding the Umbral Psychomancer. "Your eyes, those colors..."

"I've reached into the Outside," Uva admitted uncomfortably. "And I suppose something came of it. I, too, am a Unique Pathbearer now."

Valor went silent for a long moment. "Is that all?"

"No," Uva admitted. "I have another skill, another one I gained while still inside the Recollector's mind."

"What Tier?" Valor asked, sounding like he didn't want to know the answer. Shiv was confused as to why. Becoming stronger was a good thing. Gaining major Skill Evolutions was awesome. So why did Valor sound terrified?

"Heroic," she admitted, and she sounded shaken as she did. "It was... I don't think it was supposed to happen. I don't think I was supposed to develop a skill."

"What? Why not?" Shiv breathed.

"Because it's not my skill," she said. "I tore it... I tore a piece away from the Recollector while I was inside it. And that piece slid into my Psychomancy and broke off. And then it resided inside of me. It changed inside of me."

"It was like this for me as well," Adam said. "Was it purified, changed by another force?"

"The Starhawk. He intervened on my behalf."

"The Starhawk," Valor said, sounding more and more lost with every passing second. He looked at Shiv, and Shiv just shrugged. Shiv shrugged doubly, as he forgot he'd just shrugged.

"Yes," Adam said. "I see. I think... I think a good portion of what happened to us just now was a scheme, a plot on the side of the System. It wanted us to take pieces from the eldritch, the Outsiders. Unique pieces. Pieces that we couldn't possibly develop on our own. Not nearly this fast. And then pieces that would be molded to us, that would be sculpted by us by our own, by our own manner." And Adam shook his head. The stress was too much. He didn't want to deal with this right now. "I'm just glad you're all right."

"We are not all right," Valor said. "We are far from all right." The ominous tone in the Legendary Pathbearer's voice silenced everyone.

"Adam, at this pace you are all developing at... For Shiv, I could understand. His nature is aberrant," he said, sounding slightly apologetic.

Shiv just shrugged. "Yeah, but I kinda like it."

"Because you're a freak," Adam muttered. Shiv grinned.

"But for both of you," Valor continued, regarding Adam and Uva. "Adam, you are skilled in many regards, prodigious in some, but..." He trailed off. He regarded Uva. "And you, Sister, you are focused. You have great potential, but this... this is beyond even genius."

Uva nodded. "I would not call myself a genius either. I would say I'm more determined, perhaps analytical, but not so insightful. I've seen true insight. I've seen true genius."

"And one could build to that," Valor said in slight repudiation. "One could grow themselves, grow their own potential until they truly hit that point of mastery above mastery. But for me..." He tried to gather his words. "It took me forty years to gain a Heroic Skill. And I was considered peerless for my time." He looked at all of them. His skull shivered, the crack lining his bones still glistened, but an azure glow kept Valor infused with strength. "Shiv, have you..."

"Yeah, I got another Heroic Skill. Yeah, I got another Heroic Skill," Shiv said. He paused. "I also got," he narrowed his eyes, "two Master Skills. One for Stealth, one for Chronomancy."

"Chronomancy?" Valor said.

"Yeah, it just popped in immediately when my kukri broke while we were all pinned by the entity." Shiv glared hard at nothing in particular. "Come to think of it, I think that was the System's plan too. It gave me the skill the moment I was desperate and defenseless. I think it was planned this all along. The kukri, I was attuning to its mana, and after the entity held me in place..."

"Yes, that pushed you over the edge, especially with your death," Valor said with a hiss. Then, he paused. "I have seen those truly favored by the System. I am System-favored. But this is on another level. What is happening to you all is... I have never seen so much conflict and resulting growth concentrated on three people, just three, in all my years."

Adam shuddered slightly. "Valor, you're scaring me. Please stop."

"I'm scaring you?" Valor hissed. "My memories are broken. My spirit is scattered. I just came closer to death mere weeks after being freed from decades of being caged than I have in the past thousand years." Valor paused. "Perhaps that's an overstatement. But still, do you know what it's like to be shattered after having so much strength? There are so few things I can honestly say I have no idea about. And this is one of them. I have no idea why you three, you three are so... are so..." And then Valor's burning sockets centered on Shiv. And he had an epiphany. "Oh," Valor breathed. "Oh, I... I think I might have a theory. I think I..." He sagged slightly. "But first, what... what happened to this place?" He looked beyond the Garden of Bountiful Alloy to the sheer devastation that now defined Gate Theborn.

"I... Yeah, that... that might be my fault," Shiv said. "I got into a pretty nasty fight with the entity." He grinned. "I won."

"You won?" Adam said. "I killed the bloody thing."

"Yeah. After I fought it for an hour."

"I had to jump into its mind," Uva said, narrowing her eyes at Shiv in annoyance. "I had to put you back together."

"It spent most of that hour torturing you," Adam snapped.

"Enough," Uva replied, cutting into their conversation like a thrusting dagger. "We should leave. We should go back and find a temporary shelter. More." Uva's mana strands speared back toward the last surviving district of Gate Theborn. "There are people who need our help. People under the rubble."

Shiv suddenly remembered. A piece of his mind slipped back in, and he hissed as a pain rushed through his consciousness.

Uva winced. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Shiv grunted. "Keep going. I can handle it. I can handle anything."

Uva stared at him and sighed. A small smile lit her face. "I know."

"All right. Well..." And as soon as Adam started turning his sun's radiance away from Valor, the Pathbearer crashed down against the ground, lifeless once more.

Everyone stared. Adam blinked, and then he immediately poured his The Righteous Dawn Prevails back into Valor. Valor shot back up to life with a bellow. "What?"

"I think," Adam said, "I think that you might stay broken without the help of my sun."

Valor regarded Adam's The Righteous Dawn Prevails, and his body language sagged with defeat and exhaustion. "Let us be away, then, at least temporarily. There is... much for us to consider."

And from behind him, a loud, muffled moan came, and Shiv noticed a form bundled in layers of flayed skin. He recalled why the man was bundled and who the man was.

"Oh, yeah," Shiv laughed. "Hey, Uva! I got you an owl."

"I know. You truly bring me the sweetest gifts," the Umbral Psychomancer said dryly.

Chapter 94 (I) Responders

Practically every Pathbearer knows that breaking something is easy, but building it back up, or even making something new entirely, is harder than hell. I appreciate this more than anyone else because, even though I am a War Mage, most of what I do is building and reinforcing. See, I love fortresses. I love building structures, making architecture. It was my life's dream. Would have definitely pursued it if things didn't go to hell. Alas, I will have to settle for the consolation prize of making the greatest fortresses known to Integrated Earth.

And when it comes to rebuilding, there are few challenges greater, more taxing, and more rewarding than reconstructing a conquered gate from the inside out. See, it usually takes a lot of material, personnel, and firepower to take a gate. So much, in fact, that the words "mass casualties" and "90% infrastructure absolutely obliterated," along with "defenders slaughtered to the last man," accidentally happen when your Master-Tier Pyromancer overcharged his spell.

Accidentally.

Supposedly.

Probably.

On paper.

Functionally, you know that the Master-Tier Pyromancer was just throwing a bitch fit because he lost a special someone under his command, and now he's venting it on the remaining survivors. And then you also know that he's someone important's nephew, and even though you're a Master as well, connections mean a lot. Of course, connections mean a lot internally. And while your own side fucks you if you try to do the right thing, your enemies probably execute a bunch of their captives as well. Because guess what? They have connections too, and you might have just burned some of them.

But I digress. That's another topic altogether.

Rebuilding a gate from the inside. Let's start with part one: Temporary housing.

Now, housing is difficult. Frankly, let me rephrase. Housing is simple, but good housing is difficult. We've come a long way when it comes to our dwellings. We got all sorts of nice amenities: mana-sustained cooling, temperature control, the whole works. But if you need to hold people temporarily, all you need to do is have enough space, a few structures, quite a few rooms, a place for them to sleep, a place for them to shit, a place for them to eat, a place for them to be held as prisoner, and finally, a place for you to get rid of the dead.

This is part one. Part one sounds simple. It really isn't, especially not when you have to process a few thousand screaming, angry Pathbearers who all aren't so happy that you managed to take their city. And eventually, you need to get them out, because so long as you stay in place, and so long as they are regarded as the local population by the mana core, that gate isn't yours. Not until you elect a new Gate Lord. And then the rest of your problems start kicking in.

That is when we'll get to the fun chapter on mana decay...

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier War Mage

The group conducted a hasty retreat back up near the Surface Gateway. But then they found another issue to contend with: the infrastructure there was devastated. The shockwaves generated from Shiv's battle against the entity had crumbled a lot of buildings past a certain height. As such, they immediately embarked on a rescue effort. Uva and Adam worked primarily to locate survivors, while Shiv proved a remarkably effective excavator thanks to his Gravitic Wrestler.

Tactile telekinesis was a beautiful thing, as was the ability to perfectly manipulate anything you could touch. As such, he managed to move tons of debris without ever shifting their weight the wrong way and causing further harm.

Without a Gravitic Wrestler, a lot more people would have died. A lot still died, and that was increasingly a theme with being a Pathbearer. No matter what you did, even as you strove to do the right thing, even as you fought as hard as you could, when Masters, Heroes, and more clashed, it was like a natural disaster. It was a special kind of hell being a Pathless or even just a lesser Pathbearer, and Shiv knew that hell better than most.

"And that's the last survivor I sensed," Adam said telepathically.

"Doing another sweep," Uva declared. "Shiv?"

"Biomancy's not picking up anything here."

Shiv pulled a badly wounded slave child out from beneath a slab of broken concrete. She was lucky. There was a table caught there. It had snapped in half, but just enough of it retained its structure, pinning her below but not letting her be utterly crushed. Her legs were still mangled, and there was a horrible cut that had taken one of her eyes. Shiv cast a Woundeater into her, and then channeled the spell into one of the many bodies he left piled nearby.

The dead served another use for Shiv. They were repositories for his wyrms. The living, when they were badly injured, often needed immediate assistance. And the dead? Well, there wasn't much he could do for the dead, so he made use of them, including his own bodies. He hoped they would understand. But if not, well, that would be a problem he might never have to deal with, considering his nature.

As he strode out of the ruins, wearing a new set of bone armor, clutching a whimpering, gasping child to his chest, he stared at the terrified masses. Most of them had nowhere to go, and there wasn't nearly enough space across the entirety of the surfacer district to sustain them all, either. Of the few dozen buildings that had been here, only two were still mostly intact, and even they had large cracks along the

walls, with every single window blown out. The rest of the district was made up of a plaza and a few large bridges that now led to nowhere. The buildings and other plazas they had been connected to were gone.

"Mom! Mom! Mom! Mom!" the child whimpered and wheezed. Shiv's heart twisted. He looked at the gathered crowds, their densely packed bodies pressed together, their pale, tired, terrified faces showing just how fragile their courage was.

"Another lost child," Shiv said across his link. "No idea where the mother is. Didn't see her in the rubble. Couldn't feel anything with my Biomancy either."

"Place her with the others first," Uva said clinically. When she got focused, she got very, very good at compartmentalizing.

Shiv hovered up into the air and drifted over a few hundred meters toward a pin he'd constructed using his own adamantine bones. There, small tents he made from his skin decoy floated in the air. Inside, tables and first aid stations had been set up. While the mercenaries here were mostly slave runners and other unsavory Sell-Skills, they still had the martial discipline to obey orders and to understand the situation they were in. As such, their Biomancers volunteered immediately with some prodding by Siggy, and other Pathbearers with their own skills assisted in the first-response effort.

But even so, there was an aura of palpable dread in the air, an aura that constantly fed Shiv's skill.

Dread Aura 86 > 88

As people looked upon him, their eyes widened, their pupils dilated, their pulse quickened, and they always looked away. More than a few Pathbearers were High Adepts of Awareness and Reflexes. They had a guess about what he could do, about his potential tier and skills, and they told the others thereafter. Most of the weaker mercenaries avoided his gaze, did their best to stay out of his way. Some of the stronger ones let their eyes linger on him. One or two were Master-Tier, and they stared longer than most. But they, too, looked away, their courage crumbling as he glared back at them.

He knew what was going through their minds. He was, in a sense, a little bit like them. He had to be. To hunt all those lesser vampires as a Pathless, there was always the tantalizing desire to see if you could kill something far out of your league. But cold rationality blunted that animal desire. A Master-Tier was devastating, someone that could knock down buildings, someone that could cause massive civil destruction.

A Hero was a city breaker if left unchecked. And now, aside from Uva and Adam, Shiv was completely and utterly unchecked.

But that led him down to another, more perilous thought. Even though he could tear everyone in the city apart—and he had good odds of killing everyone if he mounted a surprise attack right now, if he used a combination of his Inertial Overdrive and his Strider of the Unbending Path—who was going to stop him? Who was going to make that wrong right?

And an answer came to him as easily as the sun was certain to rise in the dawn: Adam Arrow.

Another fragment of Shiv's mind snapped back into place, and he felt himself approaching full coherence again. He could indulge in deeper thoughts. And aside from considering why the System had unleashed so much torment on them, had forced them into so much conflict in such a short period, there was a realization.

He and Adam were mirroring each other slightly. Their Heroic-Tier Reflexes were almost inverse. Shiv couldn't turn; he was an avalanche of building speed and force, destructive to the extreme, impossibly

fast if given the time to stack his gravity spikes. But he didn't start that way. The one who started immediately faster and maintained that speed without any weight pressing on him was Adam Arrow.

Adam Arrow, who had a new Divination Master-Tier skill. Adam Arrow, who had been granted access to Necromancy. Adam Arrow, who could turn the azure dawn on Shiv if he deemed him vile or an adversary, if that was how The Righteous Dawn Prevails worked. Up close, Adam was fragile, but that was just the thing: Shiv would have to surprise Adam if he wanted to get up close. And he needed to exploit his temporal shell to maximum effectiveness if he didn't want Adam to incapacitate or, more likely, kill him instantly and irreversibly with his Necromancy. Adam didn't miss so much. His Veilpiercers traveled across dimensions and arrived in a near instant.

Everything about how the new Gate Lord was developing screamed counter: A silver dagger meant to slay a monster.

A monster that was Shiv.

I see the game you're playing, he thought, spitting his hatred and slightly sour admiration at the System. He did have a counter. His name was Adam Arrow. And potentially, Uva. But she now occupied stranger territory. Frankly, she was more of a danger and a predator for Adam than she was to Shiv.

If he managed to induce a berserk state in himself, she wouldn't be able to control him. More importantly, she was far slower, and she had nothing to use against his time magic capabilities. He might not be able to get to her easily in most cases, but between his Chronomancy, his Inertial Overdrive, and his other abilities, she couldn't respond to him very well. She couldn't come close to hurting him.

I see the shape of a triangle between us. A counter against a counter against a counter.

He placed the slave child down near the others, and a tall elven woman greeted him with a nod but didn't meet his gaze. The children flinched away, all bunching together in the corner of the room. Their small faces were painted with absolute petrification, absolute terror, and that clawed at Shiv's mood the worst of all. He didn't mind if his enemies were afraid of him. He preferred it if the martial Pathbearers here—the mercenaries, the guards, the deserters—were afraid of him. That instilled some measure of order, even without a naked use of force. But the common people, the innocents, for them to look at him with such scorn...

Godsdammit, he thought. I left Blackedge. I became a Pathbearer. I didn't want to go back to being like that. Yes, it was fear rather than outright disgust. Yes, he held a great measure of power, but he didn't want any reminders of Blackedge, especially since he was going to be going back to Blackedge really soon.

Shiv retreated from the medical tent as fast as he could, rising back into the air.

"Are you all right?" Uva asked him.

"I'm fine," Shiv replied. He wasn't sure if that was a lie. He was fine, better than before, now that his mind was almost completely healed, but he was still slightly bothered.

"Do you remember what I told you when you first arrived at Weave?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "Reputations can change, and they can change pretty fast."

"With just a few deeds," Uva finished. "They know you as someone clad in the visages of death right now. They think you might be a Necrotech. That is a good thing. As long as we keep our role and allegiances ambiguous, they will have to keep guessing, and it will make them uncertain. Some of that may make you feel uncomfortable, and I understand why. But understand that sometimes a slight bit of discomfort goes a long way to cementing an enduring advantage."

And once more, there was that Uva pragmatism shining through.

"Six hours," Adam said through their shared telepathic link. His mind was beyond stressed. He had been casting a Seer of Horizons into the rubble, seeking any sign of life, anyone that he could still save. "Six hours... six hours, and 3,211 lives out of 22,000," he breathed. "22,000 people."

However bad Shiv felt, Adam felt it worse. And where Shiv's thoughts drifted toward the casual cruelty of the world and the existential misery of being a weak Pathbearer or, God-forbid, a Pathless, Adam took every death onto his ego. Every death was a personal affront to him, a failure on his part.

Uva jabbed him. She used one of her strands to spear deep into his mind and rattle him. Shiv felt Adam's sudden alarm.

"What was that for?" he cried out, his woes momentarily lost to him.

"No," Uva simply said. Her voice was gentle, but cool and firm at the same time. "You are not doing that. You will not reinforce this habit."

"What habit?" Adam snapped. "A habit in which we failed to save—"

"No," Uva interrupted him again. "There is a mixture of responses," she began, "a mixture of responses that one can have to this situation. You, Adam, fit a template of impossible perfection. And that perfection will ruin your performance. Do you understand me? Because you punish yourself for not achieving the most optimal result, ignoring all the facts of the world, ignoring your own limitations, you will break yourself down, and you will simply reach a point where you are incapable of even doing good. For that's how much you have eroded your own mental capacity with self-loathing."

Adam's resulting silence was a sullen one, and she prodded him again. "Fight it," she ordered. "I know it's not easy. I know it's counterintuitive. I know it is unlike anything..." She paused and rephrased. "I know that it doesn't feel right for you to just let this go. But you do not need to talk to yourself when you feel these ill feelings. Just let them be that, ill feelings, and tell yourself that you will use these ill feelings to do better, to serve these people. That, before anything else, before even Psychomancy, is the first lesson in shaping your own mind. You must control what you say to yourself. You must control what your own narrative is. If you cannot even do that, then you will fall to the whims of external forces and misfortunes every time."

Her tone softened, and he felt her do this deliberately, tactically. She knew how to talk to Adam, just like she knew how to talk to him. As she'd said before, the first thing the Psychomancer learned to control was their own mind, and she was giving him a lesson in progress.

"We have all experienced a tremendous ordeal," she said, and once more, she very deliberately revealed something else about her, about her own damage. Both of them felt her uncertainty, her terror, and she withdrew from them a second later. But the effect was achieved. A reminder that she too, was, like them, vulnerable and fallible. And she turned the sympathy to something she could use, something that Adam wouldn't argue against, that he could follow, and forged it into a means of harnessing their focus. "We can process what happened to us later. But right now, we need to finish setting up a temporary means of shelter for all these people."

"Yeah, she's right," Shiv said. "I kind of ran out of bone. I could die a few times and..."

"That would not be necessary," Uva said. "Can Hu has more than enough material to work with the garden and the ruins to scavenge from. The automata slaves Can Hu freed will be fine in this regard, but food and sustenance will be an issue soon. The agriculture district and the Hydromancy plant have been destroyed. They will need to be replaced."

Shiv felt the urge to cringe. That's right. Can Hu was a Geomancer now. But more than that, Can Hu was a crafter. It knew how to build. And rudimentary shelters shouldn't be beyond the Penitent's capabilities.

Shiv pulled his gravity field. He shot high into the air and sailed to the top of one of the two mostly intact buildings. There, a small bunker made from a dense layer of alloy dotted the roof. And within, Can Hu, Valor, and Adam resided, monitoring the situation around what remained of Gate Theborn.

Gate Theborn. Shiv didn't even think it was going to be called that anymore. There wasn't much of Gate Theborn left. Practically no Vultegs alive either. If there were, he couldn't sense any. It was possible some had escaped back to their home dimension at some point, but he had no way of knowing.

His expression turned distant. He thought back to the Guardshead Leu, the suddenness of her death. How her revenge had only been half achieved. How he'd never know what her last words were going to be before the entity murdered her. And then he thought of her slugs. How proud she'd sounded when telling him all about them.

He didn't know much about her. And she'd been so consumed by her desire for revenge that she'd seemed like a shell of a person. But still, it had been a life. A life taken suddenly. With no chance for herself or anyone else to save her. She couldn't have anticipated it. She couldn't have known what was hiding within Confriga's sword, and nobody had the chance to do anything when it unveiled itself. He didn't have his Chronomancy at that time. More importantly, he wasn't nearly strong enough to face the entity head-on. Even if he, at his current stage of advancement, with his new skills, with all his power,

was cast back in time to face the entity once more at the point where it had held her in its hand, he wouldn't be able to save Leu.

Quietly, Shiv muttered something in eulogy to Leu and her poor, dead slugs. "I hope your clutch-brother saw what you did from the after... if there is one," he said. "I hope there's something after all this for you. You gave a whole godsdamn lot for revenge. Centuries. Your whole life. Can't even imagine how that feels. But the System... It didn't care about you. But I did. I wish I could have cooked for you again. I wish..." Shiv drew in a breath. "I wish there was a chance for you to be a person in the end."

And Shiv sighed. "I've wished for a lot of things in my life. I'll make sure that you get a grave somewhere. That you're remembered for a time, maybe. But I promise that I'll remember you, at least. That's all I can do now."

As he drifted toward the bunker, he heard a hum of approval from Uva. "It is the best you can do. It is good to be remembered after you pass."

Shiv still didn't feel it was enough.

"It never is," she replied. "When my mother died, the pain was raw at first. But what hurt me, what wounded me again and again, every day, was the absence. The death of all possibility. Our ideologies differ greatly, but there is a good reason the Necrotechs call it the Great Enemy. Death is... There is nothing. Nothing that properly encompasses what it does to the living. We have metaphors. We have stories. But an end? No return? No tomorrow? It is a dreadful thing."

Chapter 94 (II) Responders

"I feel like death is the System's favorite thing after strife," Shiv replied, slightly dour. And then he considered his own self, his own Path. "And it might be why I'm so favored. But that doesn't really explain either of you."

"It does," Valor said. His mind felt weak, but there was a clarity to him, an intensity to his thoughts that hadn't been there before. "It does. It is all because of you, Shiv," Valor said. There was no accusation in his voice, but he was certain. "All of you. Listen. I think I have... a working theory as to why you are enduring so much attention from the System."

"I will remain in contact through my Psychomancy," Uva said. "In the meantime, I will watch. Someone has to keep an eye on the survivors."

"Is that really necessary?" Adam asked. "It seems overkill. They're already badly traumatized. They're scared."

"We don't know what the mercenaries might do. And there are also a few diplomats and essential personnel here. They belong to organizations and nations that have been in contact with Compact for a while. I have already intercepted over a hundred escape attempts."

"Escape attempts?" Adam asked suddenly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was unnecessary. I resolved it,"

she said with a simple finality.

"What do you mean you resolved it?" Adam asked.

"They're still alive," Uva answered. "They will only wake, however, when I decide to return some of their faculties to them."

And once more, the Young Lord shuddered, and the triangle of strategic checks and balances between them shone clearer than ever.

"That is something else I must talk about," Valor said. "The balance is deliberate." At that declaration, Adam, Shiv, and Uva's minds all went cold at the same time.

"There are many theories as to how one becomes System-favored," Valor began. He still seemed weak, but he was animated. He stayed near Adam at all times, and the Young Lord's sun kept him supplied with enough soul-boosting power that he sustained himself. The insides of the Garden of Bountiful Alloy had been rendered sparse as Can Hu harvested a final chunk of iron from the tree on which it grew. The garden was bare, but slowly new buds were sprouting. New bits of metal and material would form in due time. For now, this place was exhausted, and it served just fine as a refuge for the team during their current predicament.

"Some believe that achieving rapid growth, having multiple epiphanies at once, and prevailing against great challenges is enough to make one favored." Valor paused for emphasis. "I disagree. Now, what makes you System-favored goes back to what the System wants."

"Strife," Adam said.

"Correct, but it is how you interact with strife that catches the System's attention. Take Shiv, for instance. When you landed in the Abyss, what happened?"

Shiv blinked. "I died."

"Yes. And then, when you resurrected?"

"Well, then I fought a cave biter baby for a while, and it ate me. Several times. Crushed me more than a few." Shiv winced. It was odd. It felt like a lifetime ago. To think that a cave biter infant would be a threat to him now was laughable after the hellish fight he just had with the Recollector.

"Indeed. And now I think the System is confused. You have a Unique Skill. You want to know what makes a skill Unique? It is the way a skill has never been classified by the System before. The way the skill has never been experienced or noted by the System before. No one else has died and come back like you. When one undergoes the ritual of the dichotomous soul in the Necrotech Legions, anytime one of their bodies is destroyed, they do not technically die. Their soul simply melds back together."

Everyone was listening attentively, and Shiv especially found himself curious about the workings of the Necrotechs' undying nature.

"You exist in several places at once. It is basically averting death by sacrificing portions of physical bodies, becoming a spiritual hydra in a sense. You, Shiv, do not do that. You can literally die. Furthermore, you come undone, but your spirit does not dissolve because it's bound to your vitality. Your mind does not disintegrate because it's bound to your spirit. And all this comes together to form a strange substance that somehow stabilizes and reverts you to the last instant before you were dead. And your consciousness is fundamentally not interrupted. The process is continuous, even if you were knocked unconscious."

"And so," Valor said, before he groaned again. Adam steadied the Legendary Pathbearer and poured more azure light into him. "Thank you, Adam," Valor muttered. "Every time you lose focus, though... My skills and soul weaken... And so," he continued with a hint of strain to his voice, "though Shiv is growing

stronger, though the System does recognize his Revenant as a Unique Skill, it is also confusing it. Your death feeds your own legend. Your own mana grows as you die. But the strife clings to you still. It notes your deaths, your repeated defeats in these conflicts, yet you do not go away. You persist. And I think... I think you are confusing the System, or you have caused it to develop a point of infatuation with you."

Shiv stared back. He didn't know what else to say. "A point of infatuation?" he muttered.

"Much of the system is still a mystery to me. I cannot proclaim to be the master of the System, to know it so deeply, especially now, in my broken, broken, scattered state," Valor spat, as if disgusted with what he was right now. "However, I do know this. I knew I was System-favored after I survived... After I murdered my mother, I fled from her great castle, leaving it burning behind me, escaping multiple Pathbearers that were greater than me, that had many more skills than I did. It was a defiance of the odds. More than that, it was ridiculous. It was a miracle I survived. And as I wandered through the chaos, I escaped into the wilderness. I endured the greatest struggles thereafter."

"What do you mean?" Uva said.

"I mean, the attempts on my life kept coming." Valor's voice was hard. "As soon as I fled into the wilderness, a group of creatures came upon me. Basilisks. I was wounded, then. I had to rely on my prodigious Stealth Skill to stay alive, but even so, they nearly killed me. While I was recovering, I had to master Adept-Tier Metabiology to pair that with my Biomancy to cure myself of a fever, and then subsequently to rid myself of a terrible poison that was inflicted upon me because I chose to recover in the wrong cave and was bitten by one of the most venomous insects in all the Abyss."

Shiv winced as he thought about Valor's struggles. It reminded him a bit of his journey through the Abyss. How would I get through that? Shiv thought. And then he realized he did have a blueprint of getting through it by dying over and over. He did die over and over. The Umbral Wilderness was a dangerous place. And to cross that, wounded, alone, and without a Revenant skill... Shiv felt his pulse quicken slightly. Yeah, the only reason I'm still here is because of my Revenant Skill. I'd be dead-dead otherwise. Valor's a hard bastard.

And then, Valor let out a sigh. "And then there was the mana storm."

"The what?" Adam cried.

"Yes, a mana storm. That nearly killed me immediately. Do you know how fast the temperatures can shift within a mana storm? I had Pyromancy and Cryomancy. Neither at Adept. By the time I emerged from the storm, I was an Adept in both and had lost an arm. I was then promptly attacked by a group of Manticores."

"For the Ascendants' sake," Adam gasped.

"The Manticores weren't so bad, especially because a group of Dimensionals promptly appeared. You see, they emerged from a gate left by the mana storm, and I didn't notice, for I was badly injured. I tried to resist them, and they beat me brutally, until they broke every bone in my body and took me away to their realm."

By now, both Adam and Shiv reacted with shared sighs. Uva winced constantly.

"Broken Moon," Shiv muttered. "That's godsdamned hell."

"Hell was when they started torturing me. For you see, they didn't have Biomancy in their realm, and they were amused that I had enough knowledge to put myself back together. It was under their cruel tutelage that I first developed Psychomancy. I was there for approximately six months. Six months, they

forced me to fight in their strange extra-dimensional arena. Six months, I trained, I toiled, I tested the limits of their psionic inhibitors, planning my escape. When I eventually did, leading an uprising, I left through the gate from which they came, toppling their city, and found myself fleeing back into the Umbral Wilderness, just as wounded as I was months ago, after I escaped my mother's castle. This was when two other mana storms came for me."

Adam clutched his head. Shiv could tell that he would have called Valor a liar, except this was Valor, and more than likely, Valor might have been understating the sheer, nightmarish tribulations he had to endure.

By this point, though, Valor let out a bitter chuckle. "I was so battle-hardened, I didn't even care anymore. I marched off into the storm, and that was how I developed Aeromancy. Do you see my point here?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "Being System-favored means the System keeps trying to kill you in more and more violent ways."

"It seems like that," Valor said, "but it is rather that the System constantly tests you, throwing greater and more severe challenges that you just barely have a chance to survive. And if you do, it feeds you, it rewards you, it nourishes your spirit from the sheer amount of mana generated during the struggle. By this point, I was still mostly an Adept. My Stealth Skill was at Master, but that was it. Frankly, without my prodigious ability to hide, I should have died long, long ago. But even so, I only became a Master after leaving those two storms. Six months, Shiv. Six months to your... What was it, a week?"

"Something like that," Shiv replied. He was starting to see Valor's point.

"You become a vortex, a magnet for all conflict once you are favored. It is like the world bestows a hidden quality to you. A hidden judgment. 'This one refuses to die. This one will stand and fight and endure in the face of impossible, overwhelming odds. This one will make for a good story.'"

There was a growl at the end of Valor's voice. "And that is what is happening to you, Shiv. You do not die. You refuse. You don't stay dead. And so it sends greater and graver threats. It whispers things to you. It gave you Foreshadowing in part because of whatever happened during the ritual your parents performed, but also probably because it can draw you into more conflicts that way. It can invite more people to stand against you, to place you against adversaries you have no business facing. What happened at Passage was absurd and unlikely, but it was also to the System's desires. The Quests you keep getting; they are attempts to find where your story might end, to feed a grand conflict. And with every subsequent moment, it is only building."

"Then what about us?" Uva asked, extremely curious as to why she and Adam were also growing so fast.

"Because you have been caught in his vortex," Valor said with a burst of passion. "Shiv refuses to die. The System tries and tries to end him, has done things beyond the absurd to kill him and make him stay dead. For most, there is a point of struggle they hit, and they have to surrender. They have to take a moment to recover. They back away. And because they back away, because they avoid a fight, their narrative does not become one of constant, extreme, and high-frequency conflicts. Constant, extreme conflicts that they should have no business surviving. But Shiv's life has been nothing but conflicts he should have had no business surviving."

"My entire life," Shiv muttered. All of them looked at him. "I hunted lesser vampires," he said, "in the ruins, as a Pathless. I was trying to get a Path. Didn't happen, as you know, but I killed a hundred of them before the Aviary bastard killed me, and I got my Path."

"And that is another problem," Valor said, shaking a hand at Shiv. "That builds upon your narrative. You are a maelstrom of strife, whether you want it or not. And everyone who stays near you, everyone who spends any prolonged time with you, who has faced these incidents with you and come out alive over

and over again, will inevitably become System-favored just because of the colossal threats it will continuously send at you."

"And so," Adam muttered, swallowing, as his expression looked stunned. "You're saying that because the System keeps killing Shiv, but he doesn't stay dead, he only prevails after coming back, that he is, effectively, beyond favored."

"Yes," Valor finished. "And because you are with him, because both of you have chosen to bind yourself to him in one fashion or another, and both of you fought alongside him, survived things alongside him, more than anyone else, you, too, are beyond favored. You, too, are being nourished by conflicts far beyond your scale. And though I don't know if the System is conscious, if it has a personality, I can tell you this: it plans, it dreams of futures, and it has desired outcomes it might like to see, grand conflicts that take shape eons in advance. Adam, it gave you the vambrace for a reason. It gave you your current skills for a reason. Look at your capabilities and think of what someone like you can do to Shiv, specifically you."

And Adam did. And Shiv did. They looked at each other and shared a mutually uncomfortable expression.

"Uva, you too. Because the System made Adam, because it does not know how to respond to Shiv, it too makes something that is easy and capable of removing Adam from the field, should its interests call for it."

"And so we're all primed to fight each other eventually?" she asked.

"Yes," Valor said. "All Legendary Pathbearers have experienced this. It is called the inevitability of strife, and System-favored know this more than anyone else. People see you fight for those you care for, and it

will make sure someone somewhere is more than capable of finishing you, that they have the right combination of skills, experiences, and more to bring you to a final end."

The mood within the Garden of Bountiful Alloy turned black and dreadful. It only soured further as a notification appeared in everyone's vision the next moment.

Quest Gained: Eliminate the COCKSUCKING FUCKS WHO STOLE MY MOTHERFUCKING GATE AND DROPPED AN UNSTABLE ANIMANCY CORE ALONG WITH A RANCID ELDRITCH INTO MY FUCKING DIMENSION! AND THIS GOES FOR YOU TOO, FUCKASS! IF THE ONE THAT DID THE SHIT IS GETTING THIS QUEST TOO, KILL YOURSELF! KILL YOURSELF BEFORE I COME FOR YOUR ASS WITH MY OBSIDIAN COCKKKKKKKKK! GET TO IT, CUNTS! YOU GOT A MONTH!

Success: +20 Levels for a Selected Skill; +10 Levels for a Selected Skill; Two [Hidden] Master-Tier items; The Enchanted Heroic-Tier obsidian dildo I will have used to fuck the bomber's corpse until I will have made a stillborn gore baby with his or her ass; Adept-Tier Skill Evolution or some shit—JUST KILL THE MOTHERFUCKER!

Failure: I pour UNHOLY FIRE AND RUIN INTO GATE THEBORN AND INCINERATE ALL YOU REMAINING COCKSUCKERS! I WILL POUR SO MUCH FUCKING FIRE THAT THE ENTIRE UMBRAL WILDERNESS WILL BURN! I MEAN, REALLY FUCKING BURN. FOR LIKE A MONTH! AND TELL THE FIVE FAITHS TO LICK MY TAIN!

Sincerely,

Lord Scorn the Ruin-Forged

Uva let out an exhausted breath as she slumped over onto the floor like a sheet of paper. Shiv balled his fists and gritted his teeth. Adam let out an exhausted, ragged cry of despair and fell to his knees.

Chapter 95 (I) Change

Alright, this book of recipes is more than just about taste, ingredients, and the monsters you can kill to get them.

Or well, the plants and other stuff you can forage, but that's not as fun as monster killing anyway, at least in my opinion.

Thanks to The Chef Unwavering, what I've basically discovered is that when you prepare dishes that are made from specific creatures and, well, maybe in a variety of different ways you can get different effects, and it can be pretty interesting and

Shit. I'm not good at this writing thing at all yet. Yeah Shiv, write and a few hundred more times... . Wish I spent more time on it at Blackedge, focusing on the written word. Right. What did Georges say? If you can't do it fancy and complicated, do it simple and right.

Anyway, let's start with the basilisk. Most people eat for the flavor. Basilisk has a really sour flavor, but more than that, the basilisk will save your life. Because you see, basilisks regenerate constantly and and thanks to the Chef Unwavering, if I cook it just right and preserve the midsection of the meat to be mostly medium while the outside remains well-done, a very specific kind of effect can be achieved.

Shit. I wrote two ands. Godsdammit. I need to cross that out.

But, before that, let's start with the poison glands. The venom glands. Whatever kind of gland it is. Frankly, there's a lot about the basilisk I haven't figured out. It's a pretty cool creature. I think I'm gonna get a lot out of it. The biology of—felling sidetracked myself again. Okay. New draft. Starting over.

-Draft Excerpt of Deep Delicacies and Exotic Delights, Written by Shiv

Greed and power were potent tools. Tools effective enough to turn smart people stupid, and stupid people suicidal.

Such was why three squads made an attempt on Adam's life almost immediately.

Three squads of mercenary Pathbearers who didn't properly consider just who they were trying to kill. Three squads made up of twelve Pathbearers who thought their Adept and, in one case, Master-Tier Stealth Skills were enough to ambush and eliminate Shiv, Uva, Adam, Can Hu, and Valor.

None of them made it halfway up the building before they were noticed by Adam. Uva's mana strands went for them first. Her reflexes were snail-like compared to Shiv—were nonexistent when he triggered his Chronomancy. One second, the mercenary teams were working their way up and along the sides of the building. Then, without any hint or reason at all, eleven of them were reduced into smears of brutalized gore. One was spared. One that found herself soaked in organs and blood. The organs and blood of her comrades. She dropped her Pyromancy-infused dagger. Her jaw quivered, her eyes welled with tears, and she began to scream. Only for a heavy hand to close around her neck. She let out a choked gasp instead as Shiv picked her up and casually shouldered his way through the walls.

Outside, people cried out. Only by now did Uva and Adam catch up to what he just did.

“Shiv. Warn me next time you use your Chronomancy,” Uva said, feeling slightly dizzy. “The effects are extremely jarring when I am linked to you.”

“Sorry,” Shiv grunted. The mercenary assassin gasped. Shiv turned her around and glared at her. He watched her eyes widen. He gave her a squeeze, and her mithril helmet shattered into broken pieces. She was sobbing wildly, whimpering for him to let her go. “I kept one alive. I’m thinking about ripping her in half in front of the other mercenaries.”

Uva considered that act with a thoughtful hum.

Adam was immediately horrified. “What? No. Don’t do that. It’s pointless. It’s cruel.”

Shiv felt his Dread Aura thundering, and he looked disdainfully at the mercenary. “She’s probably a slaver. That, and she was coming for you. She was coming for us. The fear will make the others think twice.”

“Actually, her living might be better if we desire fear. And I partially agree with Adam as well—naked brutality is effective. But only to a certain extent.” Uva’s mind was clinical, while Adam was purely operating on his own ethics. Strangely, there was an intersection. “You slew eleven Pathbearers in an instant. It is a horrifying feat. And it can be compounded by releasing a sole survivor. She will tell the others what has happened, and that will make them wary. It will also make them realize there is still a possibility of hope.”

“Hm? Hope?” Shiv didn’t get where she was going.

“Hope that they can be spared. That you are merciful. Tyrannies are built on hope. Have her released back among the others. I will keep a strand with her for now.”

“What?” Adam said, surprised. “No. We should put her in a prison or a holding facility. We cannot have her just...” The Gate Lord considered what Uva was saying. “The deliberate mercy and the fear... Are you sure it will work?”

Uva let out a slight sigh. “I am not sure of anything. But uncertainty is our ally right now. Uncertainty. Fear. And our superiority contrasted with all other Pathbearers. Lord Scorn has placed a target on our backs. We must teach the people here that we are not targets. We are the spiders, and they are but the insects we have spared in our nets. We should continue monitoring the situation regardless. It is best to keep them anxious, but also to show them we aren’t complete monsters.”

Shiv loosened his grip slightly. The mercenary gasped for breath.

“Lucky you,” Shiv growled under his breath. “You get to live a while longer.”

“I—I—” She gagged and wheezed for air.

“You should deliver her to the mercenaries on the bridge,” Uva said. “They already fear you, know little of me, and are uncertain about Adam. This can be to our advantage. We can shape their perception of us with focus and deliberate action.”

“Alright,” Shiv said. “Any idea what I should say?”

Uva chuckled. "Just be yourself. It should be enough."

"Why did you say that, Uva?" Adam groaned. "Shiv, be four percent of yourself. At most. No flaying people or killing anyone else that doesn't deserve it."

"They're slavers and bastards under Compact," Shiv sneered. "They all have it coming."

"And right now, they are prisoners of war at most under the rules of war," Adam stressed. "We cannot debase ourselves and break the laws of hospitality in these conditions."

"I don't remember signing any laws," Shiv replied bluntly.

"Shiv!" Adam hissed.

"Fine," Shiv responded.

He hovered up into the air slowly, his gravitic field making both him and his prisoner bob up and down. As he rose into the faint ambient light cast by the now azure mana core, heads snapped to him—heads from windows, heads across the entire plaza. With so many people packed tight, there really wasn't any room for most to go. A mess of tents were being set up and, in some cases, the outside was better than the insides of certain buildings just due to the sheer amount of waste that was building up.

And Shiv winced at that. The waste was partially his fault. Most of the Adepts here were still “bowel-broken” due to his brief try at biological warfare. And the effects still lingered somewhat. With so many slaves and other Initiate-Tiers, it could get very bad real fast.

“Everything to see here, folks!” Shiv called out loudly, shamelessly. “Just a failed assassination attempt.”

“Gods, Shiv,” Adam cringed.

Shiv snorted. If he had to put up with being feared, he might as well have a bit of fun with it.

As he continued his leisurely path over to the bridge leading to the Surface Gateway, Shiv looked down at the many mercenary tents lining the bridge. What’s more, the mercs were already building their own platforms and expanding their available room with Geomancy and some other skills. Soon, though, the survivors were in an uproar, loudly talking about what was going to happen. The dread across the surviving district spiked high—but Shiv didn’t get any levels.

Yeah, considering the last massive jump happened when I scared the eldritch bastard, making normal people and weaker Pathbearers terrified is not going to cut it anymore.

The surge of fear exploded through the mercenaries as he descended. Many of their number poked their heads out of their tents and gawked. Some fled back in. Most were armed, but kept their weapons low, clutched in shaking hands. Shiv chuckled the only assassin he spared down at the mercs. She bounced once but didn’t react to the fall at all. Instead, she began crawling on her hands and knees away from him. She already fouled her pants, and she was whimpering incoherently as she looked at the blood all over her.

A few other mercenaries loudly vomited. And that just made their collective morale worse.

Shiv hovered in the air for a moment, his body shrouded by the pale blue light, his form a visage of death, his irises bright white and utterly merciless. He saw Siggy in the group, and she was shaking most of all. She, more than anyone else, had contact with him, knew his aberrant nature, and knew what he was capable of. But he wasn't here to scare the shit out of her. Frankly, she did as she's been asked and found some Biomancers to keep him stable earlier, so he felt more positive about her than most people here. He gave her a nod.

Faintly, he felt the fear in her lessen. She nodded back.

So, slowly, as he dangled there in the air thanks to his gravity field, he pulled off his helmet, and he addressed the mercenaries. "All right, eleven of you are dead," Shiv said bluntly. "They tried to come for the Gate Lord. They wanted to get the rewards from the Quest and all that other stuff. Well, I can't say I blame them entirely. We're Pathbearers. We're going to want levels and items. We're going to want to grow. But I'm gonna be very honest. You can't pull it off. You can't."

He stared at the mercenaries for a while longer. Any judgment? Some were outright cowed, looking down at the ground, refusing to meet his gaze. A few others tried but failed; they flinched away, his glare too much for them to bear. And then there were some that were terrified, but they clenched their fists and they hardened their faces. Those were the ones he needed to watch, but they could also be those he could use to keep the others in check. If he targeted those, then maybe the rest would follow. He spiked his Dread Aura, and even the rebellious mercenaries began to quiver. A few of the ones that had been shivering already seemed to piss their pants.

Smells bad, but doing this is kind of funny... Shit, Uva, am I developing a bit too much sadism?

"It's alright," she replied, indifferent.

"Not a bit," Adam shot in. "Bloody hells, Shiv, they're already scared. Just threaten them a little. You're going way overboard."

"Now. I know most of you are slave-running pieces of shit or Sell-Skills without a moral fiber." Siggie cringed. Shiv kept going. "Well, you understand that if you come for us, you come for the people who slew the monster that destroyed the entire gate. Yeah. That thing? It was some kind of eldritch entity. We fought it. I wrestled with it. One of my companions ripped its mind apart. And then the Gate Lord killed it."

Shiv gave them a few seconds to digest what he was saying.

"I sense a few Masters among you," Shiv declared, "but I don't see any Heroes. And of the Masters I see, I don't think a single one of you is even a True or High. But maybe you can get lucky. Maybe you can kill me. Maybe. If you don't, though, it's gonna hurt. It's gonna hurt real bad before I let you leave for the other side." Shiv swept the crowd again, and most of them didn't have anything to say.

"But we're not just going to butcher you. Well. My companions asked me to be nice. I still might get there. Depends on if you guys keep shitting yourselves. The smell is starting to bother me, I'm not going to lie." He struggled not to laugh.

"Shiv!" Adam hissed. "That's literally your fault."

"I know," Shiv replied, cackling internally. "That's why it's so funny. I'm blaming them for it."

"But consider this a merciful warning," he said, pointing at the screaming assassin. She clawed at her clothes and hair, trying to get the blood and gore to come off. Several other mercenaries threw a blanket over her and started hosing her down with Hydromancy. "I didn't kill that one. Not because she's special. Just to show you all, I'm not here for your pain. Frankly, I don't give a shit about most of you. So, don't make me give a shit. Otherwise, you and I will learn more than a few things about Practical Metabiology together. Me more than you, I suspect."

With his speech done and his Dread Aura thundering happily inside him, Shiv prepared to turn and leave.

But then there came a thin voice, a near-defiant voice, but as Shiv listened to it, it sounded more desperate than rebellious. "And what are we supposed to do?" a tall elven mercenary gasped. She had long, flowing blonde hair, but her face was pale, her legs were shaking, and she seemed to be some kind of cavalry, judging from her kit and armor. Long lance, heavy armor, and riding leathers...

Shiv let a bit of his Creeping Void leak out before he stopped it. That only increased the unease in the air.

"You're supposed to keep yourself alive and not throw away your life meaninglessly. Because that's what's gonna happen if you keep coming for us. We will see you, and we will kill you. I will kill you. And you might not get the sudden ends the first group of lucky winners experienced."

"No! No!" She held up her hands in horror. "I—I misspoke. I don't mean that! No one will ever attempt to cash in on Quest while you are here! No one!" She looked at the other mercenaries. "No one! But—but I mean—I beg your mercy, Hero. But... There's no food," she continued, grimacing. "There's no food for the weakest of us. The few Biomancers we have also cannot care for all the sick. There was an outbreak of dysentery, so many are weak—some are dying."

At this, Shiv barely held back a grimace. Again, that was probably his fault.

“You might be able to go months—years—without food, or water, or even breath, Hero, but we are not so strong, especially with the sickness. And the people in the district... The diseases that will be certain to spread...”

And her courage crumbled as she looked away, her will to speak faltering.

Shiv didn't spike his Dread Aura again. Instead, he stared at the mercenary and considered what to do next. He descended from the sky and landed just before her. She took a step back. She was shaking, but she didn't look away. Siggy was also staring at him, peeking from around a tent.

"Right. Tell me what you need." Shiv looked up at the elf. She was really tall, which made it weirdly amusing for him how terrified she was of him.

"What?" the elf mercenary asked.

“Actually, tell me your name first. Then tell me what you need.”

"Me? I am... I am..." She swallowed but managed to get the lump down. "I am Thelora. I was... I was a Captain of the Scarlet Feathers. We were—we were a company contracted to defend the gate. I... I ran. That's why I'm alive."

She looked ashamed. Shiv grunted in understanding. "You're alive because you're wise, I guess. So. You need food and medical assistance."

"Water, too," she added.

"Power cells," an automaton cried out by the side. "And a maintenance facility."

And soon, the mercenaries were all crying out random things they needed. Shiv spiked his Dread Aura slightly. They all choked and went quiet.

"Alright, Thelora," Shiv said, reaching up to grip the deserter on the shoulder. Her face went pale as she felt the sheer power in his very fingers. "I'm appointing you as commander of these... prisoners of war. You gather a list of what you need and give it to me later. I'll see what can be done. In the meantime..." He looked at the gateway. "We'll see what to do with the gateway. Some of you are surfacers. I know you want to run. But that'll be on our time. Not yours. Got it."

Muttered agreements and breaths of gratitude followed.

"Yes. Yes. Thank you. Thank you, great Hero—" Thelora gasped.

"Don't kiss my ass," Shiv muttered. "Just keep being wise. I don't have the taste for killing you. Not after what I've been through. Got it?"

“Y-yes.”

“Good.” Shiv blasted back up into the air and watched as the mercenaries stumbled back. “I’ll come see you again in an hour. And also, get some volunteer teams ready or something. We’ll be scavenging the ruins soon. There will be plenty of stuff there too.”

Then, he shot off without a proper farewell, returning to the others.

"Well, they're gonna be a felling problem," Adam groaned telepathically. "I'm not bloody looking forward to watching them all the time."

“We might not have to,”

Uva said. “I have Siggy watching and studying the groups for me. They don’t have any proper Psychomancers. Ten Adept-Tiers. No more. They cannot hide things from me.”

“Uva. Do you have any idea how many Republic laws we are breaking when you operate this way?” Adam asked.

“None that matter, since we’re in another dimension,” Uva replied. “We do things for effectiveness. Not because of tradition. We do not hurt these people without reason. We do not do anything to them without reason. But we must keep them distrustful. As alienated from each other as they are from us. That is how we keep any saboteur cells from developing. That is my say in the matter.”

"I just..." Adam bit back his discomfort. "I am trying to accept this. I really am, but the Republic—Psychomancy is a dangerous tool."

Uva sent a pulse of reassurance into him. "Yes. And it must be used carefully indeed. But these are the methods my people use against the First Blood. And these are the same methods that will aid us now."

Adam folded. "Fine. Fine. I trust you on this matter. Just... be mindful. I don't want us escalating things to the extreme."

"I am always mindful," Uva said. "I think it is Shiv that you must worry about."

"No," Adam said. "He's your problem. You are in charge of keeping him controlled."

"Hey, asshole, I'm right here. I was plenty controlled just now." Shiv frowned.

"You made a dozen people foul their pants, Shiv," Adam complained. "I can smell it from inside the Garden of Bountiful Alloy."

"Yeah?" Shiv snorted. "I made them shit themselves tactically and strategically."

"Oh, how is that?" Adam spat. "How was that tactical or strategic? I want to hear."

“Tactically, they’re afraid but hopeful, so they might listen to us. Strategically, you got to enjoy the smell of shit, which amuses me.”

“Bastard.”

“Boys...” Uva said with a low growl. “Focus.”

“Yes. Thank you, Sister Uva,” Shiv said mockingly. “Someone has to keep us focused. Unlike a certain negligent Gate Lord who can't even figure out how to use his own core. Did you find out what's wrong with it yet? Or do you need me to find you some pills to fix the dysfunction?”

“I was busy using my Awareness, you bull-sized literal piece of shit,” Adam replied as sweetly as he could. “Besides. I know the problem. Here. Take a look.”

Gate [Name Pending]

Category 4 > 3

Skills

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

Chapter 95 (II) Change

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

Biomes

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

Districts

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

[Severe Mana Decay in Progress]

Gateways

Vulketh: [Under Lockdown due to Mana Insufficiency]

Earth (Abyss): [Under Lockdown due to Mana Insufficiency]

Earth (Surface): Under Lockdown

“Well, that doesn’t look good,” Shiv muttered. “Everything’s in decay.”

“Quite.” Adam sighed. “The only thing I can access right now are the gateways, and even then, I can only manipulate one at a time. There isn’t even enough mana to fully open or adjust the states of the gateways at the same time. The Stranger did a damn number on this thing.”

“It also likely contaminated and broke many things within the core,” Valor wheezed weakly. His mind was there, but still faint and weak—even with Adam’s light. “Many... skills. The Starhawk’s presence burned away much of the Stranger’s unnatural mana, but even so, I suspect we will be returning to a Category 3 or potentially Category 2 core. The space available to us will shrink. Skills will be lost. Available districts and biomes... All will be lost with the mass death and destruction. Along with... with the Stranger’s actions.”

“The System just can’t stop torturing us,” Adam growled.

"I suspect this is it giving you a blessing," Valor chuckled. "A Unique Gate is usually highly vaunted and desired, even if it is of a lower Mana Output Category. I suspect that, once the decay stabilizes, the skill that will become available to the core will be connected to your Righteous Dawn Prevails, Adam. That might... that might be more valuable than even a Category Eight Gate. And also... invite invading armies to try and take it from us, of course."

"Of course," Uva sighed.

"Of course," Adam spat bitterly.

"Nice," Shiv hummed, imagining what it would be like fighting an entire army.

"Shut up, Shiv," Adam snapped. "I'm in charge of this bloody core. And this is all your fault."

"My fault?"

Shiv said. "How?"

"Because you're so bad at dying, the System's now trying to kill the rest of us harder to make up for it."

The outrage in Adam's voice was tinged with a hint of faint amusement at the end. Shiv didn't feel good about what was happening to all of them either, but he had to seize on the joke. He shrugged. "You're welcome."

Adam barked an exasperated laugh. And groaned. “I just want a moment of peace. Just a few minutes. We... I still need to reply to Sijik. The Educator’s tome, the owl, the thing about... my mother being in Shiv’s soul. So many damned things and now this Quest—More! More! More! Just constantly more and more threats and problems...”

Shiv grimaced. Mere hours ago, the Young Lord was on the verge of death. None of them had been given a chance to decompress. They needed to fight for some space. To ward off the System long enough to truly recover. “I know. I need to spend some time cooking. Hell, I want to spend a year cooking. But I think we’re going to need to hold out a while longer. Together. But we’re close, Adam. The gateway is right there. We took the damned place. Now we just need to hold it, and then we can start making for Blackedge.”

“Why... Why can’t we just...” Adam didn’t finish his statement. With his mind connected, everyone knew what he desired.

“We can’t just abandon the gate,” Uva said. “Well. We can. It will just result in the both of you cut off from any support, me hidden in one of your minds or dead, and a severe operational disadvantage. This place, destroyed as it is, can be used as a sanctuary. We can hold it. We’ll build ourselves back up here. If we go out—and considering how brutal the System has become—we will likely be immediately assailed by other extreme dangers.”

Adam winced. “I hate that you’re probably right. Just feels like we’re being boxed in.”

Shiv considered how spent Adam was, and something in him hardened. “I can go out first. See if things get better if I am gone for a day.”

“No,” Valor said. “It is too late for distance to spare your companions. To spare the rest of us. They are already burning. You were the original flame, but the blaze has spread. They are marked. Without years of precise effort and luck, they will not be unmarked now. One way or another, they are in this with you for good or ill.”

And now Shiv felt like complete shit. “If I knew—”

“Nothing would have changed,” Adam cut him off. “There was no other way this could have gone. Could I have tried going my own way? Perhaps. But I wouldn’t be a Hero. Or Unique. I would be... useless. I would still be an Adept. A Master at best. But probably not. I don’t regret it. I don’t regret anything. I’m just bloody spent, Shiv.”

Shiv sympathized.

“Adam,” Uva said, “take an hour off.”

“What?” Adam said. “But the System—the gate—”

“Shiv, I, and Can Hu will be here. You will be alerted. Just take some time.”

And now the Gate Lord felt exceedingly guilty. “But you two are still...”

"I can manipulate the conditions of my own mind," Uva said. "I will spend some time when we have a moment hardening your mental architecture and also teaching you some methods to process the stress. Do not compare yourself to Shiv. The nature of his mind is almost as disgusting as his physical resilience."

"Thanks, Uva," Shiv said, entirely earnestly.

"It drives me mad with envy,"

she replied, utterly deadpan.

Adam was still reluctant, but with another pulse of her will, he sighed and went along.

"There are... other stories I can tell you about as well," Valor whispered. "I felt like I was... on the verge of breaking more than once during my time fleeing through the wilderness. I did break several times..."

And as Valor began talking to Adam, Uva cast a thought at Shiv. "Shiv. There is something I need to show you."

Shiv paused. "Just me?"

"Yes. It... it is my newest skill. It is best that I show you first. Just you alone."

"What? Why? Are you okay?"

"I don't think any of us feel okay right now. We are just enduring. But—best that I show you. The skill... It affects one's sanity and feeds off madness. I cannot risk using it near other people."

Shiv felt a worsening sense of foreboding, but also a growing interest. He really wanted to see what kind of skill she had now.

"Alright, so let's see this mysterious and terrifying skill," Shiv said. He tried to keep his voice light-hearted, but the expression on Uva's face was hard as stone and devoid of any mirth. In fact, her entire body radiated tension. "It's your second Heroic, right? Heroic Skills are usually pretty powerful."

"Shiv," she said, extending her left arm. "Can you peel part of my armor open? Just make a small gap."

They were hidden in a teleportation anchor Shiv had managed to pull out from the rubble and twist back into shape. In the darkness, it was just them, and her eyes painted both of them in ethereal, eldritch colors. Shiv missed her dark blue eyes, but her new ones were bewitching. He found himself entranced several times.

"Shiv," she repeated.

“Right. Sorry. I was lost in your eyes. Literally.”

She rolled her eyes. Shiv followed their motion.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, he regarded her completely destroyed Celestial Jade armor. Even with the reinforcement offered by his adamantine bones, it had been utterly shattered.

Shiv shuddered. If she hadn't gotten that strange Master-Tier Physicality Skill Evolution, there would be no Uva now. Gently, he made an incision, just a slight tear exposing part of her upper right shoulder.

"A little bit more," she said. "Easy enough for something to spill through."

"What do you mean, 'spill through'?" Shiv said, as he continued, widening the tear.

"You'll understand in a moment. What I am about to shape out from my flesh is undoubtedly eldritch. It is... It feeds off insanity," she finished. "I need to induce insanity into all of us to sustain it for a while."

“Draw out? How did you even get this skill, Uva. Is this going to hurt you?”

“Not physically,” she replied darkly. “It was a skill that came from both the Recollector and the Dreamtaker. As I was bound to the Recollector’s mind and struggling against it... I broke part of it, and it nearly broke all of me.”

She cast her memories into Shiv.

The Recollector's mind was unknowable, unthinkable. Shiv couldn't even follow any of the details. Past, present, and even a faint mirage of the future were all crashing together constantly. It was experiencing all these moments at once, trying to keep them together, and suddenly he understood why the Recollector's behavior had been so odd and frantic. It could barely follow itself. So often, it would have parallel tracks of the same thought that contradicted each other, and they would pull until one or multiple of its past selves decided against or for a specific thought, and only then did it decide what to do, if that was even what was happening.

Shiv started to clench his jaw as his mind strained under the weight of the memories. How Uva managed to focus on her Psychomancy while affected by that, he had no idea.

"And so you see already what it takes to compel such a thing," Uva said. "When I was within the Recollector's mind, I opened my gaze. I tore a gap into the Outside so that the Dreamtaker could unleash her New-Dreamt through, but during the process, I broke. Part of my mind split, and I gazed upon myself, and something was lodged in me, something that the Recollector struck in my stead. It would have killed me," she breathed, and then she held herself lightly. "It should have killed me."

Shiv squeezed her arm gently, and he watched as one of her mana strands sank into her own mind. She did an edit and cut away some of the existential terror. There were many benefits to being a Psychomancer. Shiv wasn't sure if this was one of them.

Uva continued after a breath. "But as it struck the fragment of the New-Dreamt, it shattered inside of me, fused with me. My soul, I thought, was going to break, and I believed I would fray like a ball of yarn being torn apart. But as I fell, as I descended, as the Dreamtaker and the Stranger's essence warred within me, they exhausted each other..."

"All because of me," Shiv said.

"It's more like we keep surviving beside you," Uva replied. "The System doesn't exactly care if we survive. This is my intuition. But it gives us these opportunities, these chances, these small, minute possibilities for which we can claim power rather than falling. And that is what we have been doing time and time again. The eldritch, the Outsiders, they're just a perfect vehicle for such a thing as well, because they have not been fully colonized by the System, because they are not claimed, and their natures are aberrant."

"But once fused with our souls..." She swallowed. "Once fused with our souls, they can be recorded. Can be shaped by mana and made into something unique."

She fell silent for a moment. "I'm going to start the process now. This will be unpleasant."

"I don't think anything is going to be as bad as what the Recollector did to me," he muttered under his breath. He looked into her eyes, into those swirling, ever-changing colors, unique colors every time. "I'm not afraid. I'm here. For you."

"And I for you," she replied.

He watched as her features hardened, as she removed the last bits of doubt in herself. And then she pulled at his sanity. She pulled at his coherence, and his thoughts began to spiral. "This is necessary. I cannot rouse it without... madness."

At the same time, she tore at parts of herself. He could feel it. She let out a grunt of disorientation, but she had so many mana strands that she was able to concurrently protect the rest of her mind from collapsing, even as she mauled part of herself. During this process, something began to shimmer and gleam along the tear of her shoulder.

Her flesh twisted unnaturally. Her body spooled into a turning spiral that churned in place and curved so unnaturally that Shiv's mind failed to understand how she moved. She folded into herself, and from the rip he left in her armor emerged a strange symbol. A strange symbol she made with her own skin. The symbol she made flashed with eldritch color. Afterward came fractal, a shape. But it wasn't a stable shape. Instead, it kept folding in on itself, twisting, slicing, dancing through the air. And then more jutting edges followed. More and more. And as it unspooled, part of its unnatural angles touched the insides of the teleportation anchor they were in.

And they sliced clean through the reinforced metal like it was naught but air.

"Shit." Shiv blinked. "That's sharp."

She shared the skill's information with him fully thereafter, and he regarded its name for the first time.

Shaper of the Aberrant Fractals 2 (Heroic)