

When I created Gravity Anchor with Sam'lia's guidance, the process involved three main steps. This technique is what Grotto referred to as 'forging' a skill, though Sam'lia had called it "the old way of doing things." It was a practice that required great care and intense concentration, and I'd been hesitant to try it out alone for fear of the potential backlash. It was possible to brick a skill by making a hasty modification, or potentially alter the skill in a way where it actively harmed you by using it.

First, I needed an appropriate 'model' skill. The ideal model was one that was already very close to the skill that I wanted to create, and the process mainly involved making minor tweaks. It was possible to forge a new skill *without* a model, but it was an order of magnitude more difficult. It was also tough to conceive of a skill that was so alien from what already existed that you'd need to begin from scratch, while also being practical, so there was little reason to do so.

Once I'd settled on a model for Gravity Anchor—Etja's Siphon skill—I then needed to ensure I could learn the model skill. While Etja was a Charisma-based caster, Siphon was an Intelligence-based spell, so I could learn it. Etja had a passive that allowed her to use CHA in place of INT for her skills, which was kind of broken. The trade-off was that she hadn't gotten to choose her skills, since they'd been 'inherited' from Orexis. That's all beside the point.

Once I'd had my model and confirmed that I was able to use it, step two was to then slot the skill using the System. This is where things got tricky.

The reason for the System's ten-slot limit on active skills wasn't arbitrary—it was a safety measure. Each time an active skill was learned, it was imprinted onto the Delver's mana matrix. The mana matrix could only handle so many imprints before the skills began to overlap and interfere with one another.

Each skill had a dedicated mana flow through the matrix. Since the mana matrix was limited, there were only so many channels for these dedicated flows to traverse. Adding additional skills beyond the cap was—to make a poor comparison—like trying to have multiple cardiovascular systems. There is only so much room in your body for veins and arteries. Having extra might result in spreading blood flow too thin, placing too much of a burden on your heart, or creating a tangled mess that absolutely fucked everything.

There were a few caveats to this 10-slot limit that Grotto had hinted at during some of our phase two discussions, but this illustrates the main thrust of the third part of forging a skill: adjusting the mana flows.

There were varying methods to adjust a skill's mana flows. The one that I was most familiar with was restrictions. While a skill was being imprinted, it was possible to voluntarily add conditions to its use which allowed for the skill to become more robust in certain areas. I had various theories for why restrictions were only accepted if they resonated with the user, but at the end of the day, magic bullshit didn't really take well to logic. If a good restriction was selected, it could be added to a skill while slotting it without much risk of messing anything up *too* badly.

For Gravity Anchor, I'd added two restrictions. One, that it could only center on myself, and two, that I could not move while using it. This adjusted the mana flows so that the gravity created was much stronger for its cost than Siphon. This also allowed the skill to use stamina, rather than mana, since the skill was wholly centered on my body. While there was great debate over what differentiated a technique—which used stamina—from a spell—which used mana—the general consensus was that techniques originated within the body, while spells could manifest anywhere. This is in addition to the obvious difference that techniques required physical exertion, whereas spells did not. I was really clenching when I used Gravity Anchor, for example.

I'd done all of this with heavy guidance from Sam'lia, who'd gently steered me away from doing anything that might cause harm to myself or result in an unusable skill. It was possible to do this with a skill that had already been slotted, but it was more complex. A skill was most malleable when first imprinted, and making changes after the fact required more forceful manipulation and thus a greater chance of catastrophic failure. Overall, it was much safer to mana shape a skill that had already been slotted. Mana shaping allowed the user to adjust the bounds of the skill once it had already passed through the channels, but before it manifested. Of course, mana shaping cost additional mana, so being able to customize the ability in the first instance was more efficient.

Now, back to me missing a chunk of my brain in the woods of Eschendur.

The pair of souls that allegedly belonged to the party's remaining ambushers were more than a mile away. That was a distance that I could run in a few minutes, but I was enraged and operating partially on instinct. I'd also noticed that Nuralie had begun to use several skills, engaging our distant foes in combat. For whatever reason, the fight did not seem to be going well.

I needed to close the distance fast. Shortcut had a range of 210 feet—which was based on my Dimensional skill—so it would take me more than 20 casts to cover the ground I needed. At a cost of 10 a pop, that was more than 200 mana total, which was well over half of my maximum mana pool. I realized that was unacceptable, even though I was

down a few billion neurons. The obvious solution, then, was to reforge the crap out of Shortcut until it allowed me to make that kind of jump at a substantially reduced cost.

One might begin to see the problem with this approach. I did *not* have the guiding hand of a Divine being while within a domain that granted her near omnipotence. I was *not* changing a freshly slotted skill, but forcefully adjusting one that I'd had since the very beginning of my Delver career. I did *not* have the capacity to act with care and restraint while performing the feat.

I did, however, still have a few advantages. Because Shortcut was one of my oldest abilities, I was extremely familiar with the skill. It was a Dimensional spell, which not only matched my attunement but also resonated with my subrace: extradimensional entity. The spell was also simple, which made it easier to modify. Most importantly, I had my Soul-Sight activated at a profound level of sensitivity.

The mana matrix was inextricably linked with the soul. By turning my Soul-Sight inward, I was able to study my own mana matrix with a level of detail and precision that was, frankly, absurd. Skill forging normally relied on feeling, intuition, and a bit of guesswork. It was like carving a block of wood while it was hidden behind an opaque barrier. One could feel and manipulate the wood as they worked, but one didn't really know what they were going to get until the carving was revealed. In my circumstance, I was able to reforge Shortcut while looking at it through an electron microscope. Unfortunately, my mental tool was the equivalent of a hacksaw.

I dove within myself, found the mana flows for Shortcut, and then committed felony-level assault on its existence. I destroyed its requirements, mana cost, and range limitations, then did what came most naturally to me. I forced it to regenerate.

Unlike physical regeneration, this did not take much time. What I'd destroyed was a pattern, not a group of cells, and the imprinting of a skill was a rapid process. As the new pattern emerged, I willed it to conform to my needs. This could have resulted in the skill having requirements I no longer met, or a mana cost that was *worse* than what it already had. This could have also made its range terrible, or potentially limiting it to long-range travel only.

However, by being able to study the pattern in excruciating detail with Soul-Sight and guide it as it regrew at every step, I was able to mitigate these hazards. Regenerating was also very on-brand for me, and I have no doubts about how important that was for this to work the way it did. There were a variety of other factors at play, such as my mana matrix being partially designed by a divine avatar for the express purpose of cheating the System at times, but what I accomplished took more than a simple

combination of privilege of dumb luck. No, the resulting success was *clearly* a product of pure skill, and a result wholly attributable to my ever-present git-gud attitude.

## **Reckless Shortcut**

### **Dimensional**

**5 mana**

**Cooldown: Variable**

**Requirements: INT 20, FOR 20, Dimensional 20**

**Tear through the cracks between dimensions and teleport to a place you can see. This skill's cooldown is based on the distance traveled, with a minimum cooldown of 1 second if the distance traveled is equal to or less than 5x your Dimensional skill level in feet, up to a maximum cooldown of 1 hour if the distance traveled is equal to or greater than 500x your Dimensional skill level in feet.**

**This form of dimensional teleportation is unbounded and places incredible strain on the body. Reckless Shortcut may cause damage if the distance traveled is too great. Damage suffered over a given distance is reduced with higher levels of Dimensional Magic and further mitigated by your Dimensional resistance.**

**This teleportation is not silent and will be significantly more noticeable when traversing longer distances.**

The spell went from a fairly simple teleport to something with a lot more bells, whistles, and nuance. It was the type of skill that required careful review and some experimentation to determine its best use cases, especially across varying distances.

It was a terrible shame that I still couldn't read.

I felt the skill reforge successfully, and I Shortcut 1.1 miles to my targets. That came out to a little less than 277 times my Dimensional skill level in feet.

I appeared on a massive tree branch with a bright flash and a thundering crack that rumbled across the forest like a lightning bolt had landed at my feet. I found myself in an enormous tree overlooking the swampy forest, directly in front of a pair of Littans. The

moment I appeared, my skin split in a hundred places across my body, ripped apart by my shiny new skill. I took note of the pain, then ignored it with the rest of the damage to my body.

I glared down at the pair, one eye missing and the back of my skull blown out, body burned and scorched by fire, with skin peeling away from numerous bloodless cuts.

The Littans gaped at me, wide-eyed and frozen. One of them was prone, aiming down the length of a small ballista, and absolutely jacked. The other had the same slim build as his teammates and bore a quiver nearly as large as he was. It was filled with six-foot-long bolts. Each bolt had a different design, with color-coded bands along the shafts, and the second Littan appeared to be in the middle of crafting a new one. Its tip dripped with venom.

They were each level 7 with thirty silver Delves, like their allies. The sniper collected himself quickly after my appearance, but the crafter lacked the same level of discipline shown by the others and was crawling back away from me.

“Hello, boys,” I said, voice raw and croaking.

The sniper lifted the ballista off the ground with an impressive display of Strength, taking aim at me. I instinctively reached for Shortcut, but the skill failed since it was on cooldown. The sniper fired, but his aim had been hasty. The bolt passed through the left side of my abdomen with such force that it went clean through my gut and armor, continuing on its merry journey into the sky unhindered. No doubt it would end up ruining some poor amphibian’s day a mile or two distant. The attack came with a status effect, and I felt the familiar discomfort of poison attacking my organs.

I glanced down at the wound, then back at the sniper. He looked down at his mini-ballista, then back at me.

“Got anything bigger?” I asked.

The crafter turned to leap off the massive branch. I used a quick burst of Gravity Anchor at full force, and his jump turned into a backward fall toward me. He landed hard on the bark.

The sniper had gone up onto his knees to take the shot at my stomach, and he was thrown down by my skill as well. He caught himself with a hand, preventing his face from burying itself into the tree, but the move loosened his grip on the ballista. It clattered over to me and I kicked it as it got close, sending it sailing off the branch and down to the ground far below.

The crafter pulled a bottle from his inventory and was rearing back to toss it, but I hurled a Void Hammer at him at the same time. He managed to make the throw but had a bad angle from how he'd landed. I easily side-stepped it as my hammer took a massive chunk out of the Littan's shoulder and neck, nearly decapitating him. The bottle connected with a branch behind me, exploding into a misty blue cloud that left a layer of brittle frost coating everything within ten feet of the impact. He wasn't dead, but he'd bleed out in seconds.

The sniper snapped up to his feet and produced a great bow from his inventory, well over five feet in height. He already had an arrow nocked, its end ignited with a massive flame, and he loosed it at me.

Gracovus flew up to intercept, and the projectile exploded into an inferno. Everything within twenty feet was bathed in sticky fire, including the sniper himself. Gracovus shielded me from the brunt of the attack, but my legs and hair were ignited. I tossed out another dispel, trying to douse myself for the second time that day, but the skill didn't have any effect. The fire wasn't magical, it was alchemical.

The sniper produced a glass orb filled with white powder and crushed it. It exploded out into a cloud of dust that consumed the fire on his body, then he prepared another arrow.

I swore and ignored the sweltering heat beginning to cook the skin along my lower extremities and scalp, then rushed the sniper. I swatted the bow just as he released his arrow, the projectile taking a chunk out of my left ear as it went. I reached out to grab the man's blistered face, but he bobbed and weaved, avoiding my hand. He kicked at my leg, sending me to one knee as he leaped back and landed on another branch thirty feet away, making it look as easy as a kid playing hopscotch. Of all the Littans I'd encountered from this ambush, he was the only one that seemed built for pure combat.

I had no doubt that I could hurl hammers until the man was reduced to chunks, but I'd likely take another hit or two in the process. I didn't know what other fun arrows he had stashed away and, besides, I had something I wanted to give him.

I focused on the experience of having a big chunk of my brain explode out of my head; the disorientation, the profound confusion, the *rage*. I connected with the sniper's soul, forced my way inside, and used Reveal to share that beautiful memory. I allowed all the agony of the wounds I'd been ignoring to wash over me and sent that experience along as a bonus.

The sniper's features twisted, and he staggered under the onslaught. Reveal alone was enough to send someone reeling, even without sharing the bucket of hurt that was my current state. It created space for me to throw another Void Hammer, which connected

with the Littan's chest. While the sniper was the most combat-focused member of the group, he *still* didn't have any more Fortitude than the rest. An orb of flesh was deleted along with his heart, and he fell from the tree.

I watched him crash through the branches, confirming the kill, then frantically searched my inventory for one of our go-bags. I found one with a variety of alchemical solutions crafted by Nuralie and dropped it onto the ground, biting my lip as the fire began burning away parts of me below the waist that I really didn't want to experience growing back. I found a large jar of extinguishing agent and broke the top off, then poured it all over my legs and head. I hissed as the chemicals washed over my many, many wounds, then stopped to wonder how bad it would be for this stuff to get *inside* my cranium.

I didn't notice any further cognitive decline after a few seconds, so I assumed I would be fine. My hair was definitely gone, but I'd managed to save my beard and... *other* delicate areas.

By this point, I was starting to come back to my senses. A little. I used the party interface to check on Nuralie. She'd taken damage and had a couple of status effects, but it seemed like she'd gotten off without too much trouble. Then her health lost another chunk.

I spun and looked out over the forest, picking up the soul presences of my allies again. Varrin and Etja were nearly on top of us, with Shog and Xim also making good time. Nuralie wasn't far from me, but she was on the forest floor a hundred feet below. I didn't have line of sight to her from where I was, but I could detect her using rapid-fire skills and her health ticked down again.

I was confused over what was going on and I scanned the forest for more enemies before it dawned on me. When I'd first begun searching the forest with Soul-Sight, I'd filtered out everything that wasn't a 'threat'. I may have set that threshold too high.

I quickly adjusted my Sight and seven new, less powerful souls appeared, all of whom were engaged with Nuralie.