

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

11 (I) Cooking

“To be Umbral is to know that you are human, but stand in the place of cattle.”

Such were the words my mother spoke to me when I was just a babe. Such were the final words she repeated before she finally perished from the plague. A plague she got from the deep slugs we tended our entire lives. And then they raised her—trapped her mind in her corpse and let her soul dissolve. They sent her up after that. Another undead soldier to the surface for their ridiculous crusade.

It was a final insult to me. The last I could take. I knew there was little I could do against my fate—to be Umbral was also to be bestowed the Path of Slave. Do you know what that is like? Do you understand what it means to have skills that demand your obedience, that make your soul more suited for supplication and bondage? Do you know...

If you do, know that we are family, and know that I am sorry. Sorry that you are me.

But if you do, also know that all is not yet lost. Even in this bleak place ruled by masters who would use us in life and death, there is hope—there are saviors. All you need to do is endure and listen. Listen for the strings of the lyre. Listen for the song of the Composer and her Weaveresses. Listen. Know. You will be saved. You will.

So please... to whatever family of mine is reading this—to the ones who understand, listen, and hope. All is not yet lost.

-Umbral: The Saved

11 (I)

Cooking

Sometimes, Shiv felt like the System was mocking him. But being as death granted him more power, he wasn't going to complain too much.

Toughness > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Physicality > 44

Parry > 13

Spear Proficiency 3

Biomancy > 9

He tried to aim for the river to break his fall. Things didn't work out the way he hoped. For one thing, the river was a few meters further than he expected—and he only realized that when he was going too fast. He created an ice construct to nudge him on course, but he ended up smashing through the entire thing, cracking several bones, and then finally impaling his head on some kind of strange crystal sticking out from the side of the shore. Frankly, if it weren't for the upraised crystal at the end, Shiv might have survived the fall. Might have.

His body was reasonably intact, aside from the crystal sticking out from the back of his head.

My limbs are still attached, so that's good. Bones might be cracked, but nothing looks fully broken. My Toughness is really improving fast. And a Skill Evolution... I like the sound of that, but I'm not fully sure what it means. Best find something to drain some vitality from soon and ask Valor.

And speaking of Valor, the dagger was calling out to Shiv, asking if he was still there. Shiv winced. He tried replying mentally, but the telepathy of the dagger seemed to be a one-way thing.

The Deathless sought something he could harvest life from—and with his expanding mana field, he got an answer. There seemed to be strange shrimp-like creatures at the bottom of the river. Each of them had these large, black pincers, and they scuttled about in the sediment, smacking each other. *Well, well, a resurrection and a dinner. How nice.*

Shiv chuckled to himself mentally as he descended into the waters. As he touched a river-shrimp, it shook and went still. Shiv felt a sliver of vitality pass through him, but not nearly enough to bring him back to life. *Hm. Their vitality must not be very strong. That's fine. There are more shrimp.* He began draining a path down the river, with each shrimp offering him a spark of life. The process took far longer than it did when he had a strong adversary to sap, but after a good two hundred or so dead shrimp, Shiv found himself alive again. And at the bottom of the river.

This led to the other problem he thought he wouldn't need to deal with earlier: Swimming. The river wasn't running too fast, so although it pushed him off course a bit, he batted at the water and kicked in the direction he wanted to go. After a few awkward minutes of struggle, he managed to clamber onto the shore. His Biomancy felt a tingle of tiny motes dancing all over his body. As

Shiv blinked, he guessed that these little signatures were probably diseases or something. His body felt like it did after he ingested some lesser vampire blood earlier.

Biomancy is proving pretty useful. So is Disease Resistance. I wonder if I can use the former to level the latter faster...

He made his way back to his body, but before that, he used his field to pluck most of the dead shrimp—and a good few living ones—out from the running river and onto the shore. “Let’s see how you guys taste with cave biter meat in a bit.”

Shiv got back to his body and retrieved his inventory. He didn’t need to get his kitchen knife this time, as it was bound to him. He frowned slightly at the spear, though. It suffered worse than he did during the fall. Its haft looked a bit cracked. He could still feel the mana inside the weapon, so that was good. He might need to do some field repairs.

Looking up, he saw no weavers, but kept himself wary. He remembered how they managed to ambush him the first time. The tainted wasp-spiders could be real sneaky if they wanted to. He wondered how high their Stealth was.

As Shiv latched his final buckle in place, he greeted Valor again. “Sorry. My belt fell off. Bad landing.”

“Shiv? Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I just... kind of lost stuff on the way down. It took me a second to get back to you when I hit the river.”

“Strange. I didn’t hear a splash. What I did hear was the distinct sound of someone’s skull being pierced. I assumed the worst.”

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Shiv blinked. The first bit of surprise was the fact that Valor could *hear* certain things outside the knife. Well, that made sense in retrospect. How else could the dagger understand Shiv, after all? The second thing that remained surprising—and a bit ominous—was how Valor knew what an impaled skull sounded like. This wasn’t a thing someone learned without plenty of experience.

“Yeah, this place is pretty weird,” Shiv replied. He liked Valor, but letting people know about his Path of the Deathless seemed unwise. Especially with what the damned mind weaver tried to pull. The creature was planning to sell Shiv to someone as an exotic pet or something. He felt its thoughts, and he wanted no part in that vile activity.

He also never wanted to fight a mind mage again. Dying was easy. Pain was always transactional for Shiv: If he got something he wanted with a little suffering, then was it really suffering? But his consciousness was a different deal. If his mind shattered, well, what would be left of him? And he couldn’t even ward that off with his Deathlessness. Apparently, his mind remained active even as a Revenant, and the mind weaver sensed him. If the spider wasn’t so confused by his supposed death, he suspected he might have been fully enthralled.

Shiv needed to watch himself in this place. That meant really using his Stealth as much as he could, rather than just relying on his Revenant Skill.

As he pulled out his compass, he let out a slight sigh as the device remained functional. It was a little dented in places, but the needle at the core still had a clear direction—now leading along the river.

Shiv looked onward and found himself in a strange wilderness beyond his imagination. This place was something else entirely. Bioluminescent plants lit

the ceiling and the vegetation, and massive colonies of towering mushrooms rose in dense patches like residential clusters. Then, there was the crystal that jutted from the back of his corpse's head. Shiv parted his original body's skull and, after a bit of digging, extracted the crystal from the ground. It felt like the same material as a few of his new daggers—and the tip of Nomos's spear.

"Nightglass," Shiv muttered, looking at the spear's composition. "Never heard of that before." But there was plenty around him. Lots of very sharp, very bright crystals sticking out from the stones and soil. "Looks like I got a bit more looting to do."

"Nightglass, you say? That will be useful. It's very sharp, but brittle. They are most often used as arrowheads, as they will punch deep, then break inside."

"Really? I can see that." Shiv started gathering a few more crystals before he caught some movement at the top of the cliff. Cursing, he pressed himself against the mountain's surface as the shadow of a weaver fell. The spider promptly crashed across the shore from Shiv's original body and lay there unmoving. A few others rained down thereafter. Shiv inched his head slightly as flashes of brightness erupted across the sky. To his surprise, it looked like the weavers were fighting each other. In the air, two weavers cast spells at each other from afar—one launching blades of wind while the other unleashed lances of fire.

“Shiv? Is something happening?”

“The weavers are killing each other,” he answered.

“Ah. Not uncommon. Feral weavers often war. Nests try to consume other nests to become the largest in an area. You likely led one nest onto another’s territory with your battle. With enough authority and wealth, they will make a pilgrimage to Weave and seek the Composer’s favor. Coincidentally, that is where we are bound as well.”

“Weave?” Shiv remembered Nomos saying something like that. “Are there going to be weavers there?”

“Yes. But not feral. Don’t worry, there will be laws. The harder part for us will likely be getting in. I suggest you hold me high when the time comes and let me do the talking. The Sisters of the Arachnae Order are not very fond of outsiders, but they know who I am. And I have an arrangement with their goddess.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Shiv moved on as quietly as he could while the weavers fought each other. He harvested another crystal before gathering his recently killed shrimp and running along the river. By the end, he found his efforts rewarded in more ways than one.

Stealth > 18

He escaped the scene at maximum pace. Once the weavers were far out of sight, he started running along the river while his eyes darted about, ready for an attack to come from any angle. His mana field had grown a bit more than last time as well, covering almost ten meters of space around him. It felt stronger, too—feeding his mind with more detail. This became Shiv's primary bulwark against hidden threats. He managed to detect a weaver trying to attack him from behind with his field earlier. It should work the same way again.

And so he pressed on for a good few hours, traveling as fast as he could while staying quiet. Across the river, he sometimes saw shapes moving in the dense fungal foliage. Once, the shadows revealed a large, humanoid creature with a long skull that sprouted wicked horns. It stomped at an even pace, seemingly leading several slugs the size of people that crawled behind it with a long staff in its hands. Shiv felt his heart quicken, but he managed to get by unnoticed.

The creature's staff left him a bit more on edge. Shiv supposed it was poetic how the mind weaver left a psychological imprint on him.

Finally, after a bit more traveling, Shiv found his compass tilting in toward a narrow valley in the distance. There was a shimmering light over the horizon, but Shiv was beginning to feel exhaustion seep through him. Physically, he probably could push further, but mentally, it had been a long day. A long day filled with constant combat, pain, deaths, and resurrections.

He probably killed more monsters today than in the last year of his life. He definitely died more today than ever before. Shiv needed a moment to decompress—to digest what he learned and refresh himself for whatever else he had to overcome. He got a little further until he found a small alcove in the mountain side. He slipped in and, after clearing out some bugs, started taking stock of his equipment. “Valor. I’m going to take a break. You think that’s a good idea? There’s no one following me—I think. I managed to find an alcove in the mountain too. I’ll put up an ice funnel with the spear and try to make a fire. I want to do some cooking.”

The dagger let out a long hum. *“I cannot say there aren’t risks, but if you haven’t been attacked thus far, you likely aren’t in danger of the feral weavers anymore. They are dangerous but very aggressive, so they will usually attack immediately once they spot an intruder. They also do not stray overfar from their territory under usual circumstances.”*

“Alright,” Shiv said. He began to unload his equipment—but still kept an eye out for things. He gathered up the materials he needed from what remained of the Umbrals’ utility kits and started making a fire in the alcove. As he got a

flame going, he formed a narrow dome of ice to keep the smoke from becoming too obvious.

With the basics done, he laid out his inventory in two neat piles.

The first pile was his weapons. He included four sharp nightglass crystals scavenged from the river among his daggers, his spear, and his kitchen knife. Shiv lacked the supplies and knowledge to properly repair the spear, so he simply fused a bit of ice into the cracks, hoping it might help.

The second pile included all his food. Cave biter meat. The mushrooms he harvested. The shrimp. Leftover hard jerky from the Umbrals. He knew he could eat the jerky, but it was the raw ingredients he was interested in. As much as Shiv liked killing monsters, cooking was his passion as well, and he never felt more relaxed than when he was slicing up vegetables or peeling potatoes, preparing to make a nice dish.

I wonder what Georges might do with all of this? Eh. Probably curse at everything and everyone and then start rage-smoking for a bit before making the best damned soup I ever tasted. The head chef had his personality quirks, but the man was brilliant. Far better a cook than Shiv was. Still, Shiv learned a lot from him, so he wouldn't have any trouble keeping himself fed now. *The question is if I can eat any of these ingredients without dying... Wait... Why*

am I worried about that? There are shrimp in the river, and dying makes me better. Time to experiment.

Shiv chuckled. This was going to be good.

11 (II)

Cooking

The first thing he did was create a few makeshift bowls. He found an abandoned shell of some kind after a bit of looking, and he carved some utensils using the stones scattered on the shore. He laid the shell on the fire, using it in place of a pot.

Shiv then studied his ingredients with greater detail. This time, instead of observing things like a chef, he used his Biomancy. His field caressed each of the food items he obtained, and his mind was awash in sensory detail. With a bit of struggle, he managed to separate the lean meat from the fat. There were lots of other *feelings* he got from the meat too, but he understood very little about what he could feel. It was a bit like having an architectural layout of flesh in his head—and it was strange to think of things that way. After prodding the cave biter meat with his field, he moved on to the shrimp. To his surprise, he found that the meats felt similar in a lot of ways in terms of composition, but the detailed differences were far greater.

It was like comparing two houses. You could tell there were bits of semblance between their shapes and certain materials, but in the end, a castle and a commoner's residence were still not exactly the same thing.

Finally, he observed the mushrooms. And found himself absolutely lost. The mushrooms weren't like the meat at all. He had no idea what he was feeling or

looking at. There were also so many small components to the mushrooms that he found himself getting lost in their biological composition, despite how small they were. Curious, Shiv chose one and compelled it to expand. It did, bursting apart and showing its dense inner flesh made out of pale, blue fibers.

“Well, mushrooms, let’s see if you end up killing me.”

“Killing you?” Valor said, sounding wary. *“Mushrooms. Are you... Are you about to cook random mushrooms you found?”*

“Yep,” Shiv said, snickering to himself. He could see the mushrooms challenging him, taunting him, daring him to discover how they taste. “We will see who is greater.”

“Are you... monologuing to the mushrooms?”

“The food needs to learn who the chef is,” Shiv explained. It was something Georges used to repeat. “And I need to know that I am the chef.”

Valor fell silent at that for a beat. *“What color is the mushroom?”*

“Bright blue.”

“Oh. Mendules, most likely. If that’s what they are, you will be fine. In fact, you can ingest them right now and gain a bit of focus. Or so I’ve been told. They have some minor hallucinogenic properties, but it is mostly auditory and comes with a sense of calm.”

Shiv stared at the mushrooms. “Well. That’s nice. I’m surprised. I expect everything down here to kill me.”

“Ah. I’m afraid you’ve gotten only a partial image of the depths. And the ugliest image at that. This place can be a realm of great beauty, wonder, and joy. But you are currently walking through the uncharted wilds—the places that none of the Five Faiths have colonized.”

Shiv wanted to ask about the Five Faiths, but remembered he was pretending to be a local. Just someone who fell from a bit higher up. If he asked something like that, he might just give away his game. That could change things between him and Valor. He didn’t know much about the dagger man either, but he didn’t need the only person helping him so far to turn into an enemy. Frankly, he didn’t want Valor to stop talking to him. The dagger had been the only positive company he had since—

Well, ever.

Georges was a good guy, but nice and encouraging, he was not. Him not insulting someone was as close to a compliment as they would get. Which was why Shiv was so surprised to hear Georges call him a pillar. That would stick with Shiv forever too. *Pillar. I’m a pillar for myself down here as well.* There was something encouraging about that. Something enduring.

Shiv began his prep work. He boiled the water and cleaned the meat as best he could. He peeled the shrimp and extracted the dense flesh from their claws as well. He didn’t know much about these current ingredients, but he knew of similar recipes that combined roast pork and crabs. Shiv would go with those as his base of knowledge and adapt accordingly. After all that was done, he sliced the meat he had into pieces. He applied the mushrooms first, added the shrimp next, and when the bubbling water was finally of a blue-gold coloring, he put in the cave biter meat and let it seep.

As he felt the flesh burn and pop, he examined the organisms again using his Biomancy. He felt how the textures of their composition changed—how their *biological architectures* warped and were altered. It was fascinating how much heat could do. A burn in a single spot could alter the shape of an entire

organism. Living tissue reacted, adapted, and tried to accommodate. That might be the biggest advantage of the living, actually. They actively tried to adapt to suit their environment. Comparatively, dead metal needed to be rebuilt.

Shiv wondered if that was why the automata struggled to keep pace with most humans and elves as they grew their skills. They were born blunted from the world in some ways.

“Shiv? Are you still there?” Valor said.

“Yeah. Just watching the meat. Trying to make sure it doesn’t burn. This needs to be perfect.” There was another benefit to his Biomancy—he could judge just how finely something was burned. There was no more visual and taste-based guesswork. He could tell exactly how cooked something was now. *This is going to be very useful.* Getting Biomancy was worth that alone. “Meat tastes different based on how much you cook it, and different things have different tolerances. Like people. That’s why you have to do them at different times. Or adjust things on the fly.”

“I see. You sound like a skilled chef.”

Shiv shook his head. “I’m barely a student, but I *am* student to a master Chef. His cooking is like nothing you could—” Shiv trailed off, realizing he was talking to a dagger. “Sorry. This must seem very boring to you.”

“Not at all. I quite like food.”

The Deathless’s eyes widened. “You do?”

“Yes. Well, I did. Before I was sealed in this cage, I had quite the appetite. I liked trying new and exotic flavors wherever I went. Ah, Shiv, have you been to New Albion? Or the Middle Realms of Chen Sheng? Have you heard of the

Golden Lands where the people remain untouched by the System, still clinging to remnants of the old ways? I have seen many of these places, made many friends and enemies, but what I remember most fondly are the flavors of their cuisines.”

Shiv felt his attention drifting, and would have let the cave biter meat burn if his Biomancy wasn't constantly warning him. “That all sounds pretty great. But no. I haven't... I didn't have the chance to travel. To even live, really. Not till recently.” Shiv reflected on his life and found his loathing of Roland Arrow to be more pronounced than ever. What *curse*? It was just something that blossomed into a Path, and Shiv was fine. He wasn't a murderer—hell, Adam Arrow and the others would have all been killed without Shiv. Well, maybe not Adam. He was taken prisoner. *What was with that anyway...* He sighed. Still too many questions. There was something about this war that just felt weird.

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“The world is a cruel and cold place,” Valor said. *“You have faced a lot of adversity?”*

Shiv considered the dagger's question. “Yeah. Enough. A lot of it pointless. It didn't have to be this way.”

“A common enough problem. That is the additional layer of salt upon the pain: Oftentimes, there is little purpose in suffering, and so the injustice is greater.”

“Yeah,” Shiv sighed. “Yeah. But we're done with that now. I'm not going back to that life. Ever. I'm my own man now. A Pathbearer. I'll do what I can to get better—to make this life something only I can control. And then... Well, right now, I'm *living*.” He chuckled. “Would you believe me if I told you this is the happiest day of my life? That everything I ever wanted was *this*? Monsters? Adventures? To go wherever I want? Be who I am? Face the dangers that

threaten me, and terrify those who would have hated me? Then enjoy a bit of cooking after? This is the life.”

“I would. I was not so different from you once upon a millennium ago. But I... was also compelled a bit by something else. An extra incentive.”

Shiv found himself curious. “What was the extra incentive?”

“My real mother had my home burned and my adoptive family massacred. She was trying to kill me. She failed. And so I went after her, thus ensuring the conditions of a Curse. But that’s a story I will not tell in detail. Not right now.”

A slight sense of disappointment passed through Shiv, but he realized something. Valor might have offered that bit to draw some information out from Shiv. Hells, the dagger might be lying. But then again, Shiv was being sort of a liar too. At least both of them were pleasant about it. “You sound like you had a pretty long life, Valor.”

“I did. And it’s still going. This is just another tale in eternity.”

Shiv liked the sound of that.

As all sides of the cave biter meat were stained in a crisp gold-blue, Shiv doused the flames and *tasted* his food using his Biomancy. An explosion of calmness swept through him, followed by a rich aroma of seafood and what tasted like caustic lamb. It was a strange dish, but a strong one. He stabbed down with his kitchen knife and took a bite. The texture crunched nicely. The heat was perfect. He had a bit of shrimp, and he grunted in appreciation. Yeah. This was good. Shiv might’ve made a damn good chef after all.

He decided to compliment himself the Georges way. “It’s not shit.”

"I'm sorry."

"Just quoting someone I know. It's good. I did a good job."

"Ah. Good to hear. You seem to have a healthy opinion of yourself."

"Someone had to. When the world hates you and you're all you got, you either join them like the beaten dog they want you to be or you stand for yourself. Like a pillar. And you prove them wrong as many times as it takes. Then you keep doing it, because you know they wouldn't have made it half as far as you did in your shoes."

"Quite the perspective. I can respect that. It is certainly healthier than my way of viewing the world as a child."

Shiv considered Valor. If what he said about the whole mother killing adoptive family thing was true...

Shiv was Omenborn. People hated him. People tried to avoid him. People threw things at him and deprived him. He was starved. But what would he have been like if they were actually trying to hurt him? To *kill* him? What if Roland Arrow wasn't so decent?

Who would Shiv be then?

"We become who we are to survive. Or to cope with the pain. Two ways of life. That's the way I see things."

"I agree. I quite enjoy talking to you. It's far more appealing than Nomos, if I am allowed to speak ill of the dead again. She was... very angry. And blamed the world for many things. She was right sometimes, but her grievances and pain led her to make several poor decisions. It is an ugly thing to state, but I think she got her sisters killed. She was not supposed to be my carrier. The quest was not hers. But she wanted the glory and to prove herself. Now the Umbrals are dead, and a stranger to their culture takes on the task they could not conclude."

"What was their quest anyway? And why are you trapped in a dagger?"

"Oh. To bring me to the Composer so that she might reveal how I might be able to be unsealed in exchange for my services. As for why I am trapped—well, someone managed to place a warding seal on something precious of mine. Things transpired from there."

"Your services?"

A pause followed. *"You don't actually know who I am, do you, Shiv?"*

The Deathless went stiff. He might have just slipped up. "As I told you, I was pretty caged all my life. I'm just experiencing things for the first time."

"Ah. I understand. Well. It's still surprising. And refreshing. I missed talking to someone who just treated me like a person instead of a myth or nightmare. But alas, when you make a name slaying Legendary Pathbearers and beings even greater than that, you melt into your own stories a bit. At times, you become the one people see in the fantasy, just because it's easier for you."

"Slaying Legendary—" Shiv nearly choked on his food. Roland Arrow was a Master Pathbearer, and he was by far the most powerful person Shiv encountered aside from the serpent vicar. Now, Valor claimed to be a slayer of Legendary beings? And *higher*? Shiv didn't even know the Paths went higher than that. The members of the Auroral Council at the head of the

Yellowstone Republic were all Legendary Pathbearers, and they were like living avatars for the gods or something. Shiv couldn't imagine what kind of power they possessed.

Yet.

"Yes, yes. It's all very loud and impressive. But also... less than you imagine. Many people die the same in the end, Shiv. Let no one tell you otherwise. The stories talk about how I slew Elder Vampire Count Halsbeth, but they don't mention how he wailed for his mother, his wife, and for life as he begged me to take my blade out of his heart. I saw... a vision of him as a child in that moment. A child standing before oblivion. And as I killed him, it scarred me."

Shiv didn't know how to respond. "Well. He was a vampire, right? He had it coming."

A deep sigh sounded from the dagger. *"We all eventually have it coming, Shiv. If you live long enough, you will understand."*

Silence swallowed the conversation thereafter. Shiv suddenly felt like a very young child trying to trade experiences with an ancient. It was interesting at times, but more than a little unnerving at others. He would need time to adapt to this too.

After enjoying his meal, Shiv cleaned his weapons and spent a few minutes just *resting*. He took in the world outside his alcove, admiring the painted "sky," the darkness, and enjoying the sounds of the river running by. A calmness sank into his very bones. It reminded him of these mushrooms.

Mendules. I'm going to get more sometime. This is good after a fight. Really takes the edge off. It occurred to him that this might be his equivalent to smoking. Looked like there was a bit of Georges in him after all. *I'm finally a real chef now.*

With that thought, a notification appeared.

Cooking > 20

A two-level advance in cooking. Shiv smiled and lifted a single arm in lazy triumph. Oh, he was going to cook so many things down here.

With that thought in his mind, he considered some other options. *Now that I have a moment, I can start experimenting on myself with Biomancy and looking over some other things. My Toughness is ready to evolve—whatever that entails. I should start warping my body in different ways. See if I can figure out how to heal myself without turning myself into a walking hive of cancers. Or find out how to remove those tumors. That'll be useful next time. If I could fight like the high vampire—or make myself a combat form, I could get a lot more dangerous.*

And so, Shiv enjoyed a few more moments of quiet as he readied himself for some good pain. With the mushrooms cooling his mind down, even the slight edge of death vanished. Everything felt smooth.

Without hesitation, Shiv turned his mana field inward and, bit by bit, started dissecting himself in vivid detail.