

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

14 (I) Weave

After the Composer birthed herself from the slumbering body of the Great One, she ventured into the abyssal depths—a babe caught amidst the strife of an already ongoing war.

The Four Faiths, in eons past, warred over the sanctity of the Great One's body. Each faction had its own design upon the fallen divine.

For the Court of the First Blood, it was that which flowed through the Great One's veins that mattered most. Their dreams were of self-empowerment: rising from ancients lost in the sunken wastes to those who could master their own inner reality. Their yearning was a simple dream—for the elder lords of the new bloodlines to rise as worthy children to the Great One, and to spread their sacred bloodlines throughout the world.

The Descenders, meanwhile, yearned to uncover the greater mysteries hiding within the Great One's flesh, forging a kingdom within the slumbering divine's bones and being the first to rise in the aftermath.

The Necrotechs—composed of thinking men, autonoma, and other post-System races—dedicated themselves to a single purpose: the awakening of the Great One and the restoration of its wounds.

But all stood offended by the Compact of Babel, who stole the Great One's heart, using it to create a great gate and forge pacts with the demons from dimensions far and weird.

Striding a path different from the old Four Faiths, the Composer herself was not bound to the Great One's body, but a fruit freed from its womb, a legacy, an inheritor—one who cared about the people looking onward into the future. And because she was so young and stood alone for so long, she found solace in song and in the plight of the small. Secretly, she began weaving a refuge for those exploited and suffering under the older Faiths who yearned to colonize her progenitor's body.

Thus was born Weave: the City of the Hidden Song, the place where the lost come to be found, the city that stands against the dark and the light alike—standing for their own, standing for the ones who couldn't stand on their own...

-City of the Hidden Song

Weave

Tension immediately flooded the chamber, but Shiv didn't care. He suffered enough at the hands of a mind mage. And he knew what they could do to him. What they could discover.

I've already had enough secrets revealed, Shiv thought. If they find out that I'm Deathless—about what I can do—it's more likely they might put me in a cage and prod me. My Unique and Legendary Skills alone would be enough to turn me from prisoner to a full-blown test subject.

The Umbrals reacted subtly to his warning. The Psychomancer among them—the one standing at the very front of their cohort—flashed her eyes, and a spark of mana indicated that she was analyzing him. That was already not good. She mouthed the word “Deathless” under her breath, and a look of pure confusion came over her. “What is your Path? I have never heard of it.”

Shiv ignored the question and pressed his warning. “I am not threatening any of you.” He held out his hands, keeping his fingers open, even as his kitchen knife remained attached to him, bound as it was. “However, I have experienced an unfortunate encounter with a feral mind weaver.”

This drew the Weaveress's attention, and once more he read something from the spider's body language—a sort of embarrassment.

“Some of our hatchlings are born with... less than full faculties,” she admitted. “It is unfortunate you encountered them, but you should rest assured that we will not damage you the same way.”

“Yeah, no. This halfway trust goes both ways, and from what you're saying, they weren't even a good mind mage. Even so, they reached into my mind and nearly broke me for good. I didn't much like that. I will surrender my weapons, and I'll do whatever else you ask. But if you touch my mind, I'll push your brain out of your eye sockets.”

The Psychomancer Umbral narrowed her eyes. “You're more than two meters away and not that fast. I doubt you'll get to any of us before I make you sleep.”

“You're probably right about that. My Reflexes are definitely lower than all of yours.” Shiv paused for effect. “There's just one problem. You're in my *field*, too.”

And slowly, her sneer faded as her eyes widened. Yeah, none of them were Biomancers. They should have covered all their bases. But then again, this was a containment chamber—a teleportation anchor. Even if this forward team was lost, they could just seal the place and trigger the spells lining the walls to incinerate everyone inside. There wasn't much he could do against that. Other than die and resurrect, of course.

"Everyone, please, control yourselves." Valor's voice held a disappointed edge to it. *"Shiv, you could have done this with a little bit more tact."*

Shiv cracked his neck and shrugged. "No mind magic. Not on me. That's my tact. If they reach in, I'll either pop them or pop myself. That's my red line. I'm sure you have yours."

Valor paused for a second, then gave a long sigh. *"I suppose I understand. Honored Weaveress, could you perhaps make an exemption? I'm sure that Shiv, as he stated, would submit to additional security measures—or even allow himself to be detained while I explain things to your Exalted Mother."*

The Weaveress considered the situation, observing Shiv. He faintly looked at the Psychomancer and Umbral, and guessed that they were communicating telepathically. Their answer to his adamant refusal to have his mind read came as the Umbral Psychomancer finally spoke: "We can handle an Adept."

Shiv could respect the confidence. Too bad they didn't know who they were dealing with. *And that was the point*, he thought. *Best to keep it that way. I'm already in dangerous territory. If I become interesting and dangerous to these people, and the spotlight gets taken off of Valor, well, who knows what might happen. Whatever the case, I'm not going back in the cage.*

He thought of all the years of misery back in Blackedge. *I'm never going back in the cage.*

A sticky sound came from behind Shiv, and he turned to see the gateway get sealed shut by a layer of webbing. On the other side—where he briefly sensed two alien biologies with his field—other Weaveresses worked to close the portal. A few seconds later, only a patch of silky-smooth webbing remained of the entrance Shiv came through.

“We request that you stand in the center of the escort, honored guest,” the Umbral mind mage spoke. “We additionally request that you keep your hands to yourself after surrendering your weapon, and that you refrain from threatening me or my sisters with your Biomancy.”

“You figured that out pretty fast,” Shiv said. “How do you know I was a Biomancer?”

“Me and my sisters have a number of magical skills. It’s one of the mana types not included. Now, if you would, please.”

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Shiv proceeded as they asked. He unequipped his kitchen knife—albeit reluctantly—and handed it over to the Umbral. *Right. Probably a good time to bring this up.* Before the Umbral could turn away, he addressed her again. “I wanted to bring back the spear that belonged to Sister Nomos of your order, but it was destroyed along my journey. I’m sorry. She died doing her duty. I preserved her and her sisters in ice somewhere way back behind me. You should still be able to find them—but Valor said their communications brooches might be compromised. Plenty of vampires there too.”

“*Filthy Bloodspawn,*
” the Umbral cursed. The Psychomancer stared at him for a long moment, then offered him the slightest of nods. “Then you have more decency than most surfacers—than most other Abyssals. Thank you.”

Well, at least this one was capable of being polite, Shiv thought.

“Expect the kitchen knife back,” he said as he stepped to stand in the middle of the group. “That’s mine. In fact, I need that back.”

None of them replied to him, and Shiv just shook his head. He thought he had bad social skills, growing up as an outcast of outcasts. But so far, it seemed that all these Umbral treated talking like it would give them the taint.

“*Peace, Shiv,*” Valor’s voice sounded. The dagger was currently being held by the Weaveress, and she used two hands to clutch it as if it was a revered relic from some bygone age.

“Oh, Great One, it honors us to see you delivered. It pleases us that you accepted our Great Mother’s offer.” She stared at Valor with her eight eyes. “There are many things we have to discuss—and many things we can offer one another.”

“Yes, yes,” Valor said, sounding suddenly very exhausted. “*But before that, there are things you need to hear about as well—from me, but also from Shiv. It has to do with Vicar Sullain.*”

At that, the Weaveress briefly stopped walking. To Shiv's surprise, the other Umbral stopped as well, perfectly in sync. He nearly ran into the Psychomancer, but he caught himself, and he shifted backward, remaining at the center of the group.

It's like they're mentally tethered together. He nursed that thought for a few moments and realized it was probably true. Mind mages. He still couldn't believe it. In all his years on Black Edge, he knew maybe only one Psychomancer—and they were in Roland Arrow's direct employ. Another one of the Town Lord's *responsibilities*. Mind magic required one to bear a Monitoring Curse to make sure that they didn't use a skill for their own various purposes—or even worse ends.

Republic sure loves its almost-slavery, Shiv realized.

As the spells circulating the teleportation chamber flashed and passed through Shiv, he watched as some patterns glided against his skin, lighting his newly gained Diamond Shell. One of the younger-looking Umbrals eyed him, and her eyebrows rose. "Why is your skin so shiny?"

"Sister," the Psychomancer said severely.

The Umbral that just spoke to Shiv sputtered and looked straight on.

“Forgive her,” the Psychomancer muttered. “She is new to the Order, and her focus slips sometimes.”

Shiv shrugged. “I don’t mind that. The rest of you are too severe, in my opinion.”

With examinations concluded and a temporary truce reached, a doorway leading out from the teleportation chamber revealed itself, and Shiv followed his escorts as they walked down a long and surprisingly luxurious hallway.

He didn’t need to go through several security checkpoints like back on Blackedge. Nor was there a clerk waiting to stamp him in and make sure that he wasn’t bringing any illicit substances, contaminants, or harboring any other questionable items. There was, however, a strong scent of incense in the air, and he found himself walking beneath web-wrapped chandeliers gleaming with brilliant shards of night-glass.

Surrounding him were stone statues of Weaveresses, each holding strange implements, looking down at him, extending their bottom two limbs as if trying to bless those who walked this path. This area was wide open, and he noted other doorways he assumed led to different teleportation anchors.

This place is pretty big—much bigger than anything on Blackedge, he thought. Slowly, he tried to piece together how large this complex might be. Blackedge was a fortress-turned-town, the tip of a spear against the abyssal invasion. This place, though—this place felt a lot bigger than a town.

It took a bit of walking before they reached a large platform. As they arrived, another group of Umbrals carrying what seemed to be a very wounded Weaveress staggered before them. A scene followed as the lead Umbral for the other group opened her mouth to speak, only to see the Psychomancer and nod. It took Shiv a moment to realize a full, silent conversation happened between them.

Felling mind mages, he thought, his unease growing.

As one, they released their wounded Weaveress and offered her to Shiv's group. A few of the Umbrals guarding him walked over and began helping the large spider creature along.

"What happened, sister?" the Weaveress with Shiv's group greeted her injured companion.

“The Court... The Bloodspawn,” the wounded spider moaned. “They are growing more brazen by the day. They are desperate, searching... They’re trying to find the dagger... before we do...”

“Ah.” The Weaveress standing behind Shiv let out a note of pleasure. “I fear it is too late for them.” She held the Cage of Valor Thann high, and the wounded Weaveress gave a most human squeal of girlish delight. “The Mother will be pleased!”

“The Mother will be pleased,” the Weaveress holding Valor echoed.

They entered the lift, and the other group of Umbrals and their Weaveress ceded their spot to Shiv’s group first. Soon, he found himself going downward—even deeper down. *How far down does this place run?* he wondered.

“You are a long way from the surface,” the Psychomancer suddenly said.

He looked at her for a moment and let out a chuckle. “Yeah, I’ve been hearing that a lot. Doesn’t help that I didn’t really want to leave. I was kind of thrown.”

This caught her by surprise. “Thrown!” The Psychomancer turned, showing half her face. Her crystalline diadem flashed brilliantly even in the dim glow, and Shiv studied her features. She had a sharp nose and more than a few scars on her lip. Her dark blue eyes were also interesting. He found himself envious of her ability to see in the dark. He also found himself regretful that he didn’t manage to steal the crystal hat the mind weaver had—or even the staff from the fire weaver.

“Yeah, I was thrown,” Shiv continued. “My home got attacked. The Abyss started a new war—or so I thought—and I ended up falling all the way down. Didn’t really want to end up down here, but sometimes life works out funny that way.”

Foreshadowing: In her room is a dagger—a blade found in her mother’s chest. Her mother was an Umbral sister too. She went out on a mission one day and didn’t truly come back. Her body and the blade were the only things returned to her. The weapon is a surfacer dagger, and she has been searching for the killer ever since.

Foreshadowing > 2

Stunned by what Foreshadowing revealed to him, he missed what the Psychomancer said the first time.

“Excuse me,” he muttered, asking her to repeat herself.

“I said, I’m surprised you’re still alive. It’s quite the long fall to go from the surface all the way down to the Umbral Depths.”

Shiv chuckled darkly. “Yeah, well... I’m pretty tough.”

“How tough?” the Psychomancer pressed. Shiv knew she was digging for answers. She was curious. He couldn’t say that he wasn’t curious about her in certain ways as well.

“Probably tougher than you. At least, without that armor you’re wearing.” He examined her armor in more detail. Each of the Umbrals here wore a webbed cloak. It obfuscated the exact nature and composition of their armor, but he could tell it was some kind of leather. The same kind that Nomos and the others wore. Unlike the mages from the surface, most Umbrals kept themselves light and quick. Strange.

Maybe I’m tougher than her, even with the armor she’s wearing, Shiv thought to himself. That thought filled him with a sense of pleasure. A few days ago, a few stray pieces of shrapnel could have laid him low. Now—now he was

marching through flame-consumed wastelands, ignoring the shouts of a dragon the size of a mountain, surviving bites from a giant snake that could rip off someone's head.

I might actually be able to survive the fall now, come to think of it. It still seems like a brutal thing to go from Blackedge all the way down to the Abyss, but I'm hard enough that I might just end up cratering the stones. In fact, seeing how my Diamond Shell lines even my bloodstream, maybe my resilience does go that far.

"Let me give you a bit of advice, oh durable one." The Psychomancer's voice held a slight hint of teasing. "You might think yourself quite strong and capable for surviving so long in the wastelands—especially surviving where a group of our own sisters could not. But here, you are not merely so dangerous, so mind yourself and act accordingly. We will treat you as befitting an honored guest, so long as you don't give us a reason to think otherwise. We have already offered a great deal of leniency toward you."

Shiv considered her words and thought that it was most acceptable.

"I won't end fights if no one starts them." And faintly, Shiv caught something: The corner of her scarred lip briefly twitched upward. *Oh, she liked that*, Shiv realized. *There's a personality in her after all.*

Weave

Some tension in the group dissipated, and they continued their descent in relative silence. Shiv knew that the Psychomancer was likely still talking to her companions, but thus far he didn't feel anyone prodding his mind. *But do I really need to feel it for them to be actually prodding my mind?* Shiv thought with a sense of wonder. Now that was a worrying thought. Maybe the mind weaver he faced before were poor at the art—crude.

Perhaps it was the same thing between Psychomancy and Biomancy. One could have a lot of strength and power, but not nearly the mastery to wield it right.

However, since she wasn't asking about his Unique or Legendary skill, or even his Feat, he assumed that she didn't truly know anything, and kept her mind to herself.

"I didn't really catch your name," Shiv asked, his voice low.

The Psychomancer went still for a moment, then replied, "No, that's right—you didn't," and left it at that.

He folded his arms and couldn't help but smile slightly. Well, he could probably learn to enjoy these conversations. He was quickly beginning to realize that the Umbrals didn't have sour and bitter personalities. They just liked to hide behind an exterior of coldness. And sometimes they nipped at you. *They're like a race of female, not-so-cuss-happy Georges's...*

Now, wasn't that a thought?

Before she could ask anything else, the platform descended past a panel of wide-open glass, and the Deathless's breath caught in his throat. Outside, he caught sight of Weave for the first time.

Foreshadowing: Behold the City of the Hidden Song. Behold the home of the Weaveresses and the sanctuary of the weak. Here you will find many of the things you seek: a place of opportunity to further your skills, a path back to Blackedge, and the one you lost at the start of this journey.

"What?" Shiv muttered, trying to get a clearer answer from the Foreshadowing.

"Did you say something?" the Psychomancer asked.

Shiv simply shook his head. "No, I'm just admiring the scenery," he lied. *Well, not technically a full lie.* He was admiring the scenery. He was also getting weird details from his skill.

All his life, all he'd known was Blackedge. Blackedge: the small fortress town hovering over the abyss. His prison, his burden, the place he couldn't go too far beyond. Blackedge was a small space with a bottom ring lined with shops, residences, and the common necessities for a fortress town, such as a garrison and a Slayers Guild, along with sky farms and whatnot. At the center, the magnificent sight of Starhawk's Perch was the only thing they had close to a skyscraper.

Shiv had seen illustrations of the capital—heard that it stretched over the horizon, spreading from the divine mountain that was Yellowstone. He couldn't fully imagine it, though, not after a lifetime of living on Blackedge.

Here, with Weave unfolding right before him, Shiv's mind reeled. He had assumed the Republic capital's size and magnificence to be a boast. Now, he suspected the capital might be dwarfed in all respects.

Weave truly did run from horizon to horizon. It kept going and going, like a sprawl composed of glistening webs that formed bridges between countless buildings. He could see weavers and Weaveresses moving between them, as well as people on so many walkways. Massive spires carved from night-glass and obsidian proved to be the primary structures, and there were artistic carvings decorating their lengths. Aside from the webs, glistening chandeliers hung from the buildings, bathing their shapes in stylistic ambience. At the top of these spires were quivering orbs of fluid brilliance. They seemed like small suns in this lightless place. Gazing upon them filled Shiv with a sense of unnatural comfort.

Most of the buildings were interconnected and interlaced. At several points, he saw what looked to be flat flying creatures.

They look like... pancakes, Shiv thought.

And then off to the side, connected to all the great spires, was a massive shape—a shape that resembled a cocoon of glistening web. Animated and glowing strands slipped out from it, gliding over the spires and traveling like living, snaking entities, moving where they needed to go. Shiv noticed an unnatural vibration to each of these webs as he tried to process what he was seeing.

A few seconds later, he heard something: a bewitching tune from a lyre that slithered past his ear.

“The Composer is playing,” one of the Umbrals breathed. “Praise—praise to hear her song.”

Most of them crossed their hands like the Weaveress did when greeting Valor earlier, and they bent over. Shiv looked at them and awkwardly followed their example, trying not to offend.

“You learn quickly,” the Psychomancer said, almost too quietly for him to hear. Shiv grinned. He only stopped bowing when they did.

As they rose up, he looked at the vast cocoon, trying to tease out more details. The surrounding light made the cocoon seem translucent, and inside he glimpsed at the outline of a mountainous figure: two very human-like arms, a humanoid torso the dimensions of a woman, and on the bottom, the body and legs of a spider, the former ending in a wasp-like tail.

The Composer. She was real. Of course she was real, but she had been real to Shiv before in the sense that the divine Auroral Council was real to him. They were not people he would meet ever. They were, effectively, beings of legend and fantasy—something he would only see in a book and hear of from afar.

But that was a different life, a different time, and now Shiv walked among these legends—and probably recently suffered a death at the hands of one of them.

Ser Marikos, you clumsy, talkative monster, he thought to himself. That had been an insane amount of fire magic to behold. He really, really wanted to get stronger. He couldn’t wait to be a Legendary Pathbearer. Well, a proper one, not just someone with a single low-leveled Legendary Skill.

The Composer’s song continued, and Shiv saw more strands of self-moving web connect and bind new shapes in the distance. To his astonishment, it seemed the webs themselves were building something, creating at the behest of the goddess. He didn’t even know webs could do that. Again, he was

reminded that, with enough mastery of magic and understanding of what one was trying to do, nothing was in the realm of the impossible.

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"I've missed her song," Valor sighed.

"The Mistress is honored that you have returned to us as ally this time," the Weaveress replied.

"An ally *this time*?" Shiv asked, curious. "Were you enemies at one point?"

"That is... a long story," Valor answered with a deep sigh. *"I told you that I was once of the Necrotech Legions. Well, the Five Faiths are not usually aligned in the best of times."*

"Oh," Shiv said. "Well, it seems like if you live long enough, enemies become friends become enemies again."

"One could say that,"
Valor replied. *"One could say that, indeed."*

As their platform came to a sudden halt at the very bottom, Shiv felt a jolt as plates sealed it in place and a new door slid open.

"How does this work?" Shiv said, gesturing at his surroundings. "How does it just know? Is there a mage on the other side?"

“No,” the Psychomancer said. “The local automata. They integrate with the structure and monitor it at all times. They can detect when a platform arrives.”

“You guys have automata too?” Shiv asked.

“Everyone has automata,” the Weaveress replied. “Where the System reaches, so too do its truest children.”

“The automata?” Shiv muttered.

“Yes,” the Weaveress confirmed.

Shiv shook his head. “Oh, there’s another lie from the Republic. They told me they’re the only ones who had automata, that they were the only ones who preserved the ancient traditions and were the rightful inheritors of the kingdom of Lost Angeles.”

“What?” the Psychomancer said, sounding absolutely confused. “But... but... the city of Los Angeles wasn’t a kingdom. It’s... it was barely a city...”

Shiv blinked. “It was?” Why did it feel like absolutely everyone knew more about everything than he did? For the hundredth time in his life, Shiv felt blind. He damned Roland Arrow for leaving him so ignorant.

“I think I’m going to need to buy an actual history book, too,” Shiv said.

“I was just about to suggest that,” the dagger whispered.

As they continued out from the platform, Shiv found himself walking in grander halls, the ceilings so high that they were practically the roofs of caverns.

"I'm starting to feel like the toad that actually got to eat the swan," he said to himself.

"Is that a surfer idiom?" the Psychomancer asked.

"That was the restaurant I used to work at. Well, I *still* technically work at. Hope it's still there."

"Restaurant? You're a chef?" the Psychomancer said, sounding surprised.

"Yeah, well, that was originally what I was kind of, sort of planning to be. Kind of, sort of." She arched an eyebrow at him. "Yeah, the, uh, monster-killing thing wasn't working out due to some external circumstances. So, you know, I was gonna end up being a chef, but it turned out that was probably not going to work out either."

"And what did work out?" she asked.

"I got thrown off my town," Shiv finished without a hint of irony.

"I see," the Psychomancer said, unsure if he was jesting or not.

There were lots of different hallways intersecting their grand one, but they just kept pressing forward until they arrived before an exit bleeding out from this... Where exactly was he?

“What is this place?” Shiv asked.

“It is the Cornerstone of *Passage*,” the Weaveress explained, speaking in place of the Umbral. “It is the only way to reach Weave. We exist somewhere between the Abyss and dimensions beyond. Thus is our sanctuary ensured.”

He stared at the Weaveress for a moment, nearly running into the Psychomancer. As he slowed, he whispered, “Wait, we’re in an entirely different dimension?”

“Of a sort,” the Weaveress said, a slight hint of amusement in her voice. “It is a personally created dimension spun by the Composer herself. And it grows larger with every passing day.”

“Praise be her name,” the Psychomancer replied.

“Praise be her name,” a different Umbral spoke, all of them eyeing Shiv. He caught a few smirks from them and realized they were enjoying themselves at his expense. Of course, they weren’t exactly mocking or insulting him, so he quite enjoyed this interaction. At least they were willing to talk to him, unlike those people back in Blackedge.

That just soured Shiv’s opinion of his own people even more.

His entire life, they treated him like he had the plague and was going to turn at any moment. And down here, well, he was still different. They were still suspicious, but at least they didn’t treat him like he was some kind of monster.

As they reached the exit, Shiv saw two Weaveresses standing guard. They both held massive halberds, the tips also made of nightglass, and they saluted the passing group. Shiv felt their eyes on him and guessed that there was curiosity and suspicion in their gaze. It was strange how human-like these spiders were, and how good he was getting at reading their body language.

“So, uh, can I ask where we’re going?” Shiv said, unsure if the question was going to offend the Composer.

“The Composer’s nest: The Symposium. The Heart of Weave,” the Psychomancer explained.

“What, the giant cocoon?” Shiv asked. As he emerged from the exit and found himself led along a wide bridge, he saw more of the outside world and couldn’t help but gawk. The nest’s design became more apparent. It was pulsating with every thread it passed along its many extended bridges, offering threads back to the city. The Composer was more than just a goddess in this place. She was its heart, literally and symbolically.

“Wow, that’s...” Shiv said. “We’re just going to see her?”

“Yes,” the Psychomancer said, as if Shiv were simple. “How else is she supposed to judge the validity of your claims and receive the great Valor Thann, He who Stills Eternity?”

Shiv really wanted a title of his own. Valor’s title was pretty cool. Shiv wondered what he would want it to be called. The Undying? The Unstoppable? *I’m gonna have to work on this—maybe fight a few more people.*

Just then, deep in his ruminations, he heard something from behind him, and something *hard* crashed against the borders of his field. “Stop him! Stop! He’s free! Stop him before he escapes!” someone cried.

Shiv barely finished turning before he heard a whip crack sound through the air. A dark shape shot past both the Weaveresses guarding the exit to the Passage. They brought down their halberds, forging a barrier of ice that sealed the doorway—but too late. A flicker blurred toward Shiv so fast that he couldn’t respond in time as they slammed the Weaveress accompanying his group off her feet and barreled into the Umbrals.

The enemy was a blur. Reaching out, they seized a shortsword from one of the Umbrals, elbowing her in the chin and dropping her immediately. A flash of glinting glass followed, and several of the other Umbrals cried out, each of them falling back with fresh wounds on their bodies.

The Psychomancer turned and unleashed a spell as patterns formed around her head. Yet the enemy resisted with a gasp of pain—rushed and tried to strike at the mind mage next. Shiv caught the gleam of nightglass. His Reflexes flared, and he saw the tip of the blade—aimed at the Psychomancer’s throat.

Without thinking, he threw himself in the way, reaching out, preparing to parry the blow. Yet a sharp lance of pain gashed across his bicep. However, the nightglass, despite cutting him, didn’t slice all the way. It slid off course from how hard his Diamond Shell was, and the enemy smashed into him, unable to stop their momentum.

Both of them ended up turning into a tangle of limbs, knocking the Psychomancer aside as they bounced across the ground. Shiv heard Valor calling out—but he was too deep in the brawl to respond.

In the end, Shiv found himself on top of the adversary by pure fortune alone. He held his hand down, trying to pin them in place, but found them remarkably strong. *A familiar strength.* Before he could deliver his first strike, he caught sight of their “face”, and his breath caught. And so did his adversary’s.

He was looking down on a dented, cracked helmet that resembled a raven’s face.

“You!” the raven-helmed stranger spat from beneath Shiv.

“Me!” Shiv growled, and then he punched him in the throat as hard as he could.